

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE LAST SONG





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
LAST SONG**

Lenny the Rock, a successful but ageing rock star, gives The Three Investigators a package containing all sorts of souvenirs and sheet music. At the same time, he invites the three of them to a party and concert at his residence to celebrate his birthday. He hints that there will be a surprise in store for his guests. However, during the performance, Lenny disappears in front of the audience. Immediately, Jupiter, Pete and Bob commence investigations. Very soon, they realize that the clues to the musician's disappearance are in the package.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Last Song

*Original German text by
Ben Nevis*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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(The Three ??? and the Last Song)

by
Ben Nevis
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Cover art by
Silvia Christoph

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1. Invitation to Moonlight Star

A car drove into The Jones Salvage Yard. The small stones that got under the wheels of the car crunched tantalizingly on the firm and dusty ground.

Jupiter Jones loved that sound. That meant that someone had come, and with that, something would happen. At its dullest, it could be a customer looking for some inconsequential item in the salvage yard, like a used car battery or a painted flowerpot. If he found what he was looking for, Jupiter had to explain why the item cost so-and-so many dollars and not much less... Or the visitor turned out to be someone who wanted to get rid of an old floor lamp or a dining set that was no longer complete. Then Jupiter had to explain to the seller why the object on offer was only worth so-and-so much and not much more.

However, sometimes there were also the other visitors—the mysterious ones—who offered or were looking for something very unusual. With a little luck, the visitor could bring a new case for The Three Investigators. Jupiter was hoping for that today.

Together with Uncle Titus, Pete and Bob, he was taking apart an old boat engine that was causing some problems. Now the First Investigator put the screwdriver aside and raised his head expectantly. An all-terrain SUV came to a stop next to the gate. A tall, burly man got out. He wore a chequered shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and washed-out jeans. His long grey hair fell almost to his waist.

The visitor slammed the driver's door, opened the back door of the car and took a large package from the back seat. Then he let this door fall shut as well, turned around and strode towards the group at the boat engine.

The First Investigator took note of the man coming over. He had to be around sixty, Jupiter estimated and rummaged in his memory—and somehow the man looked familiar!

Now Uncle Titus also straightened up. "Lenny," he called, wiping his hands on a cleaning cloth. "Lenny! You are here in my humble kingdom?"

"Well, if you don't come to see me, Jones, then I'll just have to struggle down the canyon!" The man laughed boombingly. His deep voice seemed to fill all of Rocky Beach.

Uncle Titus put the cloth aside, walked up to the visitor and greeted him warmly.

"It's Lenny the Rock," Bob said to his two friends. "I don't believe it!"

"The Lenny the Rock?" Pete was electrified.

"The one and only Lenny the Rock!" confirmed Bob. "He has been in the business for decades, made over thirty albums, mostly together with his buddies from Moonlight Star. Hits like *Sweet Heart of San José* or *Hey Ho My Joe* have been played up and down the radio for years. One of the greats. I didn't know your uncle knew him, Jupe!"

"Uncle Titus buys things from him now and then—old furniture, discarded musical instruments..." the First Investigator explained. "When I was little, he used to let me hang out with him from time to time!"

"You never told me that!" Bob remarked.

"I don't really care about celebrities," Jupiter said, emphatically indifferent. "And besides, I'm not too knowledgeable about rock music. I would be more at home with Mozart or Bach."

"In his day, Mozart was also something of a pop star," Bob remarked.

In the meantime, Lenny and Uncle Titus had finished the welcoming ritual and approached The Three Investigators. Lenny had tucked the package from the car under his arm.

Jupiter couldn't shake the feeling that Lenny belonged to the third category of visitors—the exciting one. The rock star certainly wasn't looking for an old ceiling lamp.

Before they could start talking, the stony sand crunched again. Another vehicle had driven into the yard—now of all times, just when things were getting interesting, Jupiter thought.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jupiter noticed that it was a large, light-coloured van that now parked next to and almost hiding the rock star's car. A door opened, a man got out, stood around a little indecisively at first and then strode along the fence towards a book case containing old books and magazines. He squatted down and began checking out some items. Jupiter decided that, for the time being, the newcomer didn't need any assistance.

"You're... Jupiter!" Lenny boomed as he and Uncle Titus set up in front of The Three Investigators. The rock star's tanned face radiated an immense calm.

Purposefully, Lenny's fat finger pointed at the First Investigator. "The last time I saw you, you tripped over your feet and almost landed on my Fender guitar! I just managed to save it, but I'll never forget that stunt!" He laughed heartily and patted Jupiter hard on the shoulder. "Are you still in your investigation business?"

"Still are... along with my friends Pete and Bob here," Jupiter said. "We call ourselves 'The Three Investigators'." He then reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out their business card and gave it to the rock star. The card said:



"Hi!" Pete said. He was so excited that he couldn't say anything else.

"Hi, Lenny." Bob's voice also sounded a little dry.

"I read about you guys in the papers all the time," Lenny said, casting an admiring glance at the three boys from his clear blue eyes. "If I hadn't become a musician, maybe I would have become an investigator. Interesting job! Who knows, maybe I'll try it someday—solve a case and intervene directly in life! As a musician, you just sing something about it." He winked at them.

"Depending on how you look at it!" Bob commented.

Lenny's eyes lingered on him. "You can argue about that for a long time! Hey! I know you from somewhere else... Sax Sendler, right?"

Sax Sendler ran a music agency that Bob worked for from time to time.

Bob nodded. "Very possible."

"Used to be friends with old Sax," Lenny said, lowering his voice. "Good guy, unfortunately we have our differences. Anyway, let's get down to business, Titus." He tapped the package.

“Let’s go to the verandah,” Uncle Titus suggested. “Do you still have time for a cup of coffee?”

“Coffee from your wife? Always!” said Lenny.

A few moments later, they were sitting on the verandah, enjoying coffee and Aunt Mathilda’s famous cherry pie.

“I should visit you more often,” Lenny said, squeezing out of the camping chair and bowing to Aunt Mathilda, who was about to join them at the table. “Your cherry pie is really the best!” Then he dropped back into the chair. Jupiter feared that it would not be able to bear Lenny’s weight, but the straps of the seat only creaked slightly.

Aunt Mathilda raised her voice to say something. “Lenny... I... it... oh, I’m embarrassed!”

“Go ahead, Mathy!” roared Lenny.

Mathy? Amused, The Three Investigators looked at each other.

“My friends,” stuttered ‘Mathy’ Jones, “they... well... could I take a... photo... together...”

Lenny laughed. “Nothing easier than that! Why not come over here? In the background, you have the fantastic salvage yard and in front Mathy, bubbling with life!”

Aunt Mathilda blushed slightly and sat down next to Lenny. He put his arm around her and looked at The Three Investigators. “Do any of you have a mobile phone with you?”

“Jupe, why don’t you go get the camera?” Mathilda said. “The quality is much better.”

The First Investigator got up and went into the yard office to get the camera. A moment later, he was back and took three photos to be on the safe side. Lenny’s hair blew atmospherically in the evening breeze. Uncle Titus suddenly wanted a photo too and the musician obliged with amusement.

Lenny then pointed to the package he had placed on the chair next to him. “What I’m here for, Titus... there’s some stuff in there I’ve been sorting out—sheet music, song lyrics and such—a few originals too, and some things I got as gifts. Can you check them out for me and tell me what they might be worth? I’d like to donate the proceeds to the school in the canyon.”

“Sure,” said Uncle Titus, honoured. “I know music pretty well and I’m sure Bob can help me with that!”

Lenny looked at Bob. “Yes, it would be great if you took a good look,” he said slowly. “with your two friends too. You seem to be up to all sorts of tricks, if what I read about you is true!”

Jupiter smiled and looked at the yard, which another customer had entered. She looked around for help and seemed about to come closer. The man at the book case just stood up, waved over as if to say: ‘Thanks, sorry I didn’t find anything’, and walked back to his van. Shortly afterwards, he drove away. With half an eye, Jupiter looked at the van going off. Had he been mistaken or was there also a person sitting in the passenger seat?

Meanwhile, the new customer headed straight for the verandah. “I’m looking for a drying bonnet,” she said shrilly, “do you have one of those?”

Aunt Mathilda stood up. “I’ll take care of the lady,” she said quietly to Uncle Titus. Then she called out loudly: “Of course! You’ll find just about everything in The Jones Salvage Yard!” Energetically she trudged down the verandah steps. “—Unfortunately,” she added with a sideways glance at her husband.

Lenny grinned. “And now my collection will be added to it! ... Temporarily, at least, but that’s not all I’m here for,” he said. “Tomorrow I celebrate my birthday! I’ll be sixty-five. Well, that’s how it looks now, unfortunately!”

“Oh, Lenny...” Uncle Titus interjected dryly. “Rust never sleeps!”

Lenny laughed. “Well answered, Titus! Yes, I’m still in top shape and I’m still a long way from knocking on heaven’s door! The party’s at my place, Moonlight Star. It starts around eight o’clock! Together with the boys from my band, I will give a small concert—just for musicians, friends and neighbours, plus a few guests of honour. About forty or fifty people will be there and we’ll let it rip, I can tell you that! It would be my great pleasure and honour if you would come, Titus! With your wife, of course!” He glanced at The Three Investigators. “And you’re very welcome to bring the boys too—as long as Jupiter doesn’t fall on my guitar...” he added with a grin.

“Thank you!” said Uncle Titus. “I don’t know if—”

The Three Investigators cleared their throats audibly.

“—I can accept that,” Uncle Titus completed his sentence.

“You can, old boy,” Lenny said in a booming voice, “and get some earplugs to be on the safe side! It’s going to be loud, I promise you! And there’s a little surprise too!”

“A surprise?” Jupiter remarked.

He was about to ask, but Uncle Titus was already saying: “I’m delighted, Lenny! Invitation accepted!”

“Well, see you tomorrow! And one request—don’t sell anything from this package yet! Evaluate it and...” Lenny looked at Uncle Titus, then at The Three Investigators. “... Keep it for me for now, will you?”

“You can count on us,” said Titus Jones.

Jupiter nodded and pinched his lower lip. Evaluate... and keep it... Was there possibly another purpose behind this request?

Shortly afterwards, Lenny got into his car and drove off.

2. The Package

Moonlight Star, the house where the musician lived, was part of a hidden little cluster of houses high up in Red Wood Hills. Lenny had bought the houses one by one over the years. As Bob knew, guitarist Ron and bassist Morning-Joe also lived there with their families.

Together with Keith, the drummer who owned a small country house in Malibu, they formed the band Moonlight Star. Lenny had named the property after the band. He lived there with his wife Sue Tamara, to whom he had been married for ten years. It was his second marriage.

The Three Investigators sat with the still unopened package in their headquarters, an old mobile home trailer which was converted into an office. It was located within the premises of the salvage yard, and hidden under all kinds of junk to conceal it from outsiders.

“How old do you think this Sue is?” Pete wanted to know after listening to Bob’s explanations for a while. “Twenty-six, I bet!”

“Sue Tamara is about fifteen years younger than Lenny,” Bob explained.

“Children?” Jupiter wanted to know.

Bob shook his head and puffed. “Hey, I’m not the registrar for births! As far as I know, he doesn’t have one, but with a rocker’s life like that, who knows? The man’s been around quite a bit! Maybe three? Ten? Or even a hundred? Wait!” Bob sat down at the computer and searched for a page of information on Lenny the Rock.

“My goodness, that’s paragraphs upon paragraphs...” he said. “Heaps of awards, hits... no kids. What else do you want to know? ... Lenny the Rock is known for his socially conscious songs, for his love songs, and for ‘consistently hard-to-interpret lyrics peppered with powerful linguistic imagery that have puzzled experts for years’. So there you have it... and Lenny doesn’t seem to like the police very much. In a couple of songs, he criticizes the overly harsh operations against homeless people in LA. Shall I tell you more?”

“Anything that is more interesting?” Pete said with a grin.

“Okay. Wait. Yes, every now and then, he’s good for pranks and jokes. Once the band members started a concert wearing silicone masks with Lenny’s likeness. All the musicians looked the same and nobody knew who was who. The intro was an instrumental and afterwards it came out that Lenny was on the drums and the bass player played guitar, and nobody noticed!”

Jupiter laughed. At the same time, he felt a very familiar tingling in his stomach when a mystery approached. “Thank you for the information, Bob,” he said. “Now let’s look inside the package! I wonder what Lenny meant by this surprise he wants to present at his party.”

“You’re anticipating way too much again,” Bob said. “He’s probably performing with some other star or with his wife. Those are the usual highlights at parties like this!”

“I hope it will be something more exciting!” Pete interjected. “Lenny’s music isn’t really my thing. That stuff is too old-fashioned for me!”

With that, he got on the wrong side of Bob. There was almost no music Bob didn’t listen to—rock, heavy metal, hip-hop, rap, reggae, jazz, and even world music. The only thing he wasn’t good at was classical.

“Don’t underestimate Lenny!” said Bob. “He even did a recording with the Black Prints from Seattle the other day, and they must be right up your alley!”

“Him and them?” asked Pete in amazement. The Black Prints were currently one of his favourite bands.

“I’m telling you, he’s not going to call it a day any time soon!”

In the meantime, Bob had removed the cord that tied the package up. Carefully, he removed another strip of tape and unfolded the wrapping paper.

What emerged were various awards, including many CDs sealed in transparent plastic, all kinds of figurines and objects that turned out to be souvenirs from concerts or small festivals. At the bottom of the box was a pile of papers.

Jupiter looked at the items thoughtfully.

“Jupe, you’re looking for a secret again, aren’t you?” asked Bob. “—A mystery and a new case! And what if, for once, there is no mystery?”

The First Investigator remained silent.

Bob shook his head, took the papers and leafed through them. “Sheet music, song lyrics, variations of songs—this stuff could make quite a bit of money! But we’re hardly the right people to market it. You need auction agencies for that, preferably ones that specialize in music.”

“Maybe Lenny wanted an independent assessment first,” Pete said.

“Uncle Titus has asked us to record every item,” Jupiter interrupted them. “After all, we are supposed to give comprehensive information. I volunteer to write everything down if you tell me one by one.”

“If you want...” Bob handed Pete about half the contents and they took turns dictating the finds to Jupiter.

“A duet version of *Kisses in Alabama*,” Bob said. “He sang it with Sandy Carson. I think he had a secret relationship with her once.”

“I’m afraid I can’t offer any information like that,” Pete took over, “just a plastic figurine of a guitarist from the Ohio Festival.” He shook it. “Hollow, it seems... I wonder if it holds some secret in it.”

“Now don’t you start with secrets too!” Bob shook his head. “I’ve got a cover version of *Know Your Rights* here, which I believe he only sang once—at a prison, I think.”

“Golden CD of the radio station Top 100,” Pete dictated.

“Handwritten sheet music for a song called *La-La Song*,” Bob said. “Must be new, never heard of it. It’s written on both sides of a single sheet of paper. Hmm... *La-La Song*...”

“Sounds more like mainstream country,” Pete commented. “I’ve got a poster of the Newport Festival to offer! With signatures on it.”

“Autographs from musicians?” asked Bob.

“Can’t decipher it!”

“Give me that!”

Jupiter noted down everything. In the end, there were 47 items. All in all, it was quite a variety of stuff.

“Looks like Lenny threw this together quickly,” Jupiter said. “I don’t see a system behind it. It seems strange to me.”

“Why?” asked Pete.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I suggest, Bob, that you do some research and I’ll take a photo of each item in the meantime.”

“What’s the point?” asked Pete.

“We’ll need it to get quotes, for example. We’re hardly going to send out originals, are we?”

After the boys were done inspecting the contents of the package, and made all the necessary records, Jupiter brought the package to the yard office as Uncle Titus had said that he also wanted to take a look at the items at a later time. He had asked Jupiter to keep it in the cabinet there.

In the office, Jupiter went to the old cash register. To the left of it was the cabinet, of which the key was hidden at the front left foot. He used the key to open the small wooden door, and placed Lenny’s package into a compartment.

3. A Difficult Guest

The next day, towards evening, Titus, Mathilda, Jupiter, Pete and Bob got ready for the party at Moonlight Star.

For the three boys, this only took a few minutes. Jupiter didn't change at all, but simply grabbed a jacket for it could get chilly in the mountains in the evening. Pete had put on a Black Prints T-shirt and Bob wore an historic roadie jacket from Lenny's Stuttering Moonlight tour. Uncle Titus took a little longer to find the right combination of jeans and leather jacket. When he was done too, they had to wait a while for Aunt Mathilda, who couldn't decide between a festive black dress and her new country outfit. In the end, she squeezed into some old hippie clothes.

As there were five of them, they decided to go in two vehicles. Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda would go in the pick-up truck, and the three boys in Pete's MG. Pete let Uncle Titus lead the way there.

The sun was already low as they turned into the canyon, in the higher elevations of which lay Lenny's estate. Traffic snaked around bend after bend, but diminished a while later. The valley itself was sparsely populated. Again and again, narrow roads led sideways through the bulky shrubs into the canyon's hinterland, where the homes lay hidden in the dense greenery.

Halfway there, they passed The House of Hidden Treasure, an unusual shop where all kinds of strange objects could be bought. Uncle Titus had ever sold one or two curious trinkets to its owner, Mr Strummer.

Finally they reached the wooded areas. As they went downhill a bit, Jupe pointed out fresh paint marks and scratches on a rock face in front of them that he had spotted in the headlights. Apparently there had been an accident here recently. Pete braked carefully and as they passed, they could see broken glass on the side of the road. The First Investigator would have liked to get out, but it wasn't convenient with his uncle and aunt in the truck just in front of them.

Soon, both vehicles turned off the main road at a seemingly inconspicuous side path. Now they drove along a bumpy road that forked a few times. Finally they rounded a bend and there it was in front of them, surrounded by trees, in the cool evening sky, the Moonlight Star estate!

A wall protected the grounds from strangers' glances, but above the wall ledge, one could see the upper part of the house, which looked like an oversized log cabin. On the roof was a glowing star, the symbol for Moonlight Star. Two cameras monitored the entrance. A steel gate provided further security, but at this moment, it was wide open.

Both Titus and Pete drove into the interior of the compound, where several cars were already parked. Jupiter spotted a van from B&Lunch—a down-to-earth, but reputable and good catering company. Jupiter's stomach began to growl.

Just then, several people got out of a car in front. Among them, Bob recognized Robert Byrd, the great songwriter. He was accompanied by Marsha Mellows, the actress.

At the point where the car park turned into a path, Lenny plodded up and down like a heavyweight boxer, greeting his guests. Next to him was a wooden table on which a pile of gifts was stacked, surrounded by a sea of flowers.

“Glad you’re all here,” he called out to the Rocky Beach arrivals after giving Robert Byrd and Marsha Mellows a big hug. Lenny seemed to be in high spirits.

“Hello, Lenny!” Uncle Titus said and handed him a violin, around which he had tied a bow. “It’s for you on your birthday. It’s got a great country sound. I have kept this for a long time in my secret archives. You collect musical instruments, don’t you?”

“Wow! Titus! This is a thousand times better than all the flowers and wine stuff, as nice as they all are!”

Titus smiled proudly.

“And now come in. The stage is set up behind the house. Food and drinks are over there too. Sue will show you around. Thank goodness the party can go ahead as planned!”

“Why?” asked Jupiter.

“When I was coming back from your place yesterday, my brakes failed—not far past Hidden Treasure, at the section where it goes downhill a bit, but I scraped the rock face and used it as a brake!” He laughed out loud and clapped his hand on his thigh. “And only yesterday, I was joking about knocking on heaven’s door!”

Jupiter furrowed his brow. “Did the police investigate the incident?” he asked.

“Oh, trifle. I’m fine. The car is dented on the side, that’s all. It hasn’t been in the workshop for ages, and now it’s there.”

“Anyway, you’re not a big friend of the police, are you?” Titus asked.

“Police?” Lenny shook his head and laughed. “You brought along some investigators here tonight, haven’t you? I much prefer them!”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully.

More guests arrived and Lenny had to turn his attention to them. Aunt Mathilda, Uncle Titus and The Three Investigators strolled leisurely along the stone-paved path that curved around the house. Both sides were lined with trees and bushes. At larger intervals, warmly glowing lamps shining onto the landscape from the side tastefully pointed the way. The terrain seemed to stretch endlessly. Jupiter let himself fall back and breathed in the fresh and spicy air.

A little off the path stood two men, each holding a glass. One of them was dressed very conspicuously. What caught the First Investigator’s eye most was the impressive watch glinting from under the sleeve of an expensive satin suit.

“I don’t know why Lenny invited me,” the man just said, “but of course I couldn’t refuse! When the king calls—”

“—Then, Mr Clayton—” the other man started to answer. He noticed Jupiter’s look and interrupted himself.

Jupe turned away and caught up with the others, who had strolled on without paying attention to the men.

Nearer to Lenny’s house, there were spotlights set into the ground, casting an orange-brown light on Moonlight Star, giving the property a magical ambience. Jupiter saw that Lenny’s residence had two distinct wings—a higher one and a lower one that occupied a larger space.

When the path opened up to the square, The Three Investigators stopped. In front of one of the buildings, the musician had a sturdy wooden stage built, on which musical instruments had been set up. It was framed by a lighting system that bathed the scenery promisingly in yellow, red and green light.

“We should be attentive,” Jupiter murmured to Bob and Pete. “Did you bring your investigation equipment, Pete? Flashlight? Lock pick set?”

“Yes, yes!” said Pete. “—But I still don’t know why! Why can’t we have a free evening and enjoy the music here? And the good food, of course.”

“I have a strange feeling about something,” Jupiter said.

“—Because of Lenny’s accident?” Bob remarked. “That was indeed a bit strange.”

“That’s right, Bob!” Jupe agreed.

They looked around. In front of the stage, tables were placed at loose intervals, half of which were already filled with guests. There were lively drinking and talking.

Bob spotted Sax Sendler, who was engrossed in a conversation with Ernesto Lara from the record company Galactic Sound. Many well-known musicians were there. Bob was impressed... but ordinary people like Mr Strummer, the owner of Hidden Treasure, or Mr Smith of Booksmith bookshop, had also come to the party.

Uncle Titus had also spotted a couple of his friends and nodded to them in greeting, while Aunt Mathilda preferred to look around for the celebrities.

Suddenly they were approached from the side. “Welcome! You must be the Jones family!” said a velvety female voice.

They turned in the appropriate direction. A tanned blonde woman wearing a plain white linen dress approached them, smiling. “I’m Sue Tamara,” she said. From her brown eyes she gave them a warm look. “Lenny’s wife. Welcome to Moonlight Star!”

“The Jones family is not exactly right!” Uncle Titus greeted Sue and clarified the circumstances.

“And I thought they were all your boys!” Sue laughed and beckoned an employee of the catering company over. “What would you like to drink? The food is set up over there, around our fountain.”

Jupiter had already noticed the fountain with the buffet. It was framed by an impressive ring of torches that illuminated the tastefully arranged food.

“That’s a very impressive fountain you have there,” Jupiter remarked.

“Yes! We preserved and reconstructed it when we converted the old Red Wood House into Moonlight Star!”

The waitress came in with a tray and Jupiter, Pete and Bob each took a freshly squeezed orange juice. Aunt Mathilda had a glass of sparkling wine and Uncle Titus asked the waitress, a preened blonde in a white jacket, if he could have a glass of beer.

“Of course! I’ll tell my colleague who’s in charge of the beer. He’ll bring you one right away!”

“Colleagues? I don’t see anyone else at all. How many of you are here today?” asked Titus in a chatty mood.

“There are five of us here. I’m sure you won’t have to wait long!” She smiled curtly and strode on.

“How embarrassing,” Aunt Mathilda said to Uncle Titus, “as if it wasn’t quick enough for you!” She cast an apologetic glance at Sue Tamara.

“But I didn’t mean it like that!” Uncle Titus defended himself. “I just wanted to be... uh... friendly... a little—” But he didn’t get to finish his sentence.

Tim Durnell, a local songwriter who had caught Bob’s eye earlier because he had two full glasses of beer in front of him, broke away from a group of musicians and staggered towards Lenny, who had just arrived at the square with guests.

“Lenny, you scumbag!” roared Durnell in a slurred voice. “Take that, you old thief!” Then he flung the contents of one of the glasses in the host’s direction. However, his aim was poor and Lenny only got a few splashes. In anger, Durnell tossed the glass aside and lunged to give his opponent a heavy blow.

Lenny looked unimpressed. “Don’t you want to put the old stories to rest, Tim?” He towered over the attacker by at least a head.

Tim Durnell paused for a moment. “Is that why you invited me? So I’d finally give it a rest?” He took another swing. At that moment, two other guests rushed at Tim and held him back. One of them was Sax Sendler. “Be cool, Tim, be cool!”

With difficulty, they managed to keep Durnell away from Lenny. They talked fiercely at him, then Durnell broke away and left the square in a hurry.

There was an awkward silence. Most of those present stared at their feet as if it were written there what would happen next.

Only Lenny was completely relaxed. “Hey, guys!” he said with his usual booming voice. “Don’t get too worked up over that little performance! It’s a rock-‘n’-roll party here! And not a gala evening for Oscar winners! Tim has been complaining for years that I stole a song from him. I guess we’ll never settle on that!”

He took a few steps towards Sue Tamara, hugged her and said to the guests: “All right, everybody. Now let’s have a little something for the fright! The buffet is open! And in half an hour we’ll start! By then, you must have tasted at least the appetizers. You better get something before we blow you away with our performance! That’s right, friends!”

He toasted in a certain direction and Bob recognized Ron and Morning-Joe from Lenny’s band, both, like Lenny were already over sixty, as well as Keith Denver, the drummer, who just stepped next to his fellow band members. All three raised their glasses and toasted back. Bob had the impression that Keith was smiling less at the birthday boy and more at Sue Tamara, who in turn looked around with relief.

“Well,” said Aunt Mathilda, “then I’ll go get a bite.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other meaningfully and followed her. On the way to the buffet, Bob met Sax Sendler.

“You here too?” asked Sax, almost seeming a little disappointed that he had to meet his part-time employee at such an exclusive party.

“More or less by accident,” Bob said. “By the way, that was just short of a fight.”

“Oh, Tim Durnell.” Sendler shook his head. “Supposedly the chorus of *Long Road, Very Long Road* is his. That’s where he’s clinging to it now, for lack of success of his own. I think they both stole the chords from Bob Dylan at the same time!”

Bob laughed. “Sax, excuse my curiosity, I heard you had a fight with Lenny once too?”

“Did Lenny mention that?”

“Well, indirectly...”

“Oh, I’m over it. Lenny is a sly one! I had him under contract for a while, before your time at my agency. Before he left, he was obliged to deliver one more album to me—and he did!”

“Let me guess—*Campfire*?”

“Bingo!” Sax Sendler patted him on the shoulder. “You’re good, Bob! He hammered out *Campfire* for me, with ten terrible songs, recorded in a single evening. It was a complete failure commercially! But he had fulfilled his contract and then went straight to another agent at Galactic Sound.”

“One song from *Campfire* has become a hit, after all,” Bob said. “*The Disappearing Hobbit*.”

“Oh, that piece only survived because Lenny loved to include it in his shows. He puts in a fog generator and in the haze, he suddenly disappears from the stage! Performance wise, the gimmick was completely insignificant! In the first place, do you find the song any good?”

Bob shook his head. They had reached the buffet and had to stop the conversation. Bob came to a halt in the queue directly behind Marsha Mellows—so close that he could breathe her delicate perfume. Bob's gaze fell on Pete, who was in a second queue behind Aunt Mathilda. The Second Investigator would have loved to swap places with Bob.

And where was Jupiter? Normally he was always where the buffet was, but strangely enough, there was no sign of the First Investigator.

"Excuse me!" Bob said to Sax Sendler and left the queue.

Hopefully nothing had happened to Jupiter... but where should he look? Bob chose the path to the car park, which now lay deserted. Perhaps Jupiter had followed Tim Durnell. The heavy steel gate at the entrance was now closed as all the guests had arrived by now. A car park lamp had failed, leaving the section dimly lit. Bob stopped and counted the cars. Twenty-four vehicles were parked here, including the catering agency's delivery van.

Slowly, Bob's eyes became accustomed to the surroundings. He tried to listen for sounds, but from the other side of the house, the murmur of the guests' voices came to him like a soup constantly bubbling away. Did he hear a low moan nearby?

Cautiously, he stepped forward a few metres, left the path and entered the car park. Immediately he stopped again. There it was again—the moaning. Now it was coming from the side.

"Jupe?" he whispered.

Nothing.

"Shhh!" it now sounded directly behind him.

Bob turned around, ready to take to his heels at a moment's notice. Someone was standing there, about two metres away!

"It's me!" the shadow hissed.

"Pete? Sheesh... did you scare me or what?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing!"

"Find Jupe!"

The moaning could be heard again. It sounded as if someone was in pain.

"What was that?" asked Pete. "Wait! I have light..."

Pete's flashlight flared up. Bob took it from his hand. He shone it in the direction from which he had heard the noise.

"I hope it's not Jupe," he whispered. He felt his way around the nearest of the parked cars and aimed the flashlight carefully into the gap between them. Nothing.

He crept past one more car. There was someone lying on the ground!

4. The Disappearing Hobbit

“Jupe?” asked Pete, horrified.

“No,” Bob said, shining his light on the person. “That’s Tim. Tim Durnell. Hey, Tim!”

He was about to lean over him when he heard someone approaching from the front.

Startled, he looked up.

“Oh, here you are!” a voice said.

Bob exhaled in relief. It was Jupiter.

“Can’t you let me know when you’re leaving?” the First Investigator said. “Without me, you’ll be in trouble.”

“Excuse me?” asked Bob. “You’re the one who’s gone missing!”

“Well, I’m entitled to go to the toilet without informing anyone,” Jupiter said. “Anyway, who do we have here? Durnell?”

“Yes!” Bob lifted the torso of the man moaning softly to himself and looked him in the face. “Mr Durnell? Hello?”

“Yes, yes,” groaned Durnell. “Wait... wait!”

After a few attempts, the musician got himself up enough to lean against the car. “I’m all right,” he muttered. “Oh man, my head!”

“You have a bleeding wound on your side,” Jupiter said. “Here’s a clean handkerchief. What happened, Mr Durnell? Did you see the attacker?”

Durnell raised his arm and pointed limply upwards. Bob shone his light in the direction he was pointing. There was a tree on the perimeter of the car park. “I think I missed the branch,” Durnell muttered. “Don’t remember. Wanted to get home. Dumb party!”

“Anyway, we’ll get you back to the house first!” said Bob. “You’ll need a plaster at least. Come on, we’ll help you up.”

Durnell pulled himself up and hooked up with Pete and Bob.

“Bob, give me the flashlight,” said Jupiter. “I’ll have another look at the tree!”

Bob tossed him the flashlight, turned and nodded to Pete. Together they held Durnell in their midst and set off.

When they had almost reached the house, a tremendous, booming sound rang out. It was an electric guitar. The concert was about to start!

The feedback from the electric guitar slowly died away and silence reigned again. Apparently this was meant as a signal for the audience like that at the beginning of a theatre performance. Everyone could still quickly sort themselves out and then at the third signal, the show would begin.

When Bob and Pete reached the space in front of the stage with Durnell, the bystanders backed away a little. The guests thought the musician was merely drunk and looked pityingly at Pete and Bob. The idea of helping them did not occur to them.

Only an elderly lady, whom Pete thought was an actress, approached them. “Did Tim hurt himself?” she asked, brushing his hair aside to get a better look at the wound.

“He hit a tree branch,” said Bob. “He needs some treatment!”

“I’ll be all right,” Durnell grumbled, only to almost regain his old tone immediately afterwards. “Lenny... I’ll show him! Yes, he... will see!”

“Come on in first,” the actress said and led the group of three into the house. A woman from B&Lunch came over and helped the musician, promising to clean his wound and put a plaster.

At that moment, the electric guitar sounded for the second time. “Get out of here, boys,” Durnell said, “or you’ll miss the great master’s performance! And keep clapping, yeah! Oh... and thanks for the help! I’m okay.”

Pete and Bob went back outside. Meanwhile, the guests—stocked with food and drink—had positioned themselves expectantly around the tables. Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda were having a conversation with Mr Smith.

Bob pushed Pete in the other direction where after a few metres, they came across an unoccupied table near the stage.

The third signal sounded. Bob saw that it was the guitarist who had been operating his instrument next to the stage and was now turning a knob to distort the sound. As the sound faded, Lenny climbed on stage, draped an electric guitar around himself, and applause erupted in between loud ‘Lenny, Lenny’ shouts.

“Stop it, guys!” shouted Lenny. “Quiet! Calm down! We haven’t even played yet! Who knows, maybe you’ll find it all too... cheesy!”

Again there were applause and heckling.

“Well! I welcome you once again! Thank you for coming and doing me the honour! I hope you have a great party!”

“Yeah!” a few yelled.

“But before we get started, I have a request. Most of you know this—no recordings of any kind—audio or video! Just sit back and enjoy the show!”

“Yes! Come on!” someone shouted. Everyone clapped.

The rest of the band climbed onto the stage—Ron, the lanky guitarist first, who had tied his mottled grey hair into a ponytail; then the stocky-looking bassist Morning-Joe, whose bald head was only crowned by a narrow grey fuzz; and finally, juggling the drumsticks and still muscular despite his age, came Keith Denver. The people screamed and whistled with excitement.

Lenny grinned and waited a moment. “May I introduce you to my band of pensioners.”

Big laughter. “Forever young!” shouted one man.

“You all know them—Ron, Morning-Joe and Keith. Let’s go, guys!”

The three of them went to their instruments, nodded to each other and then they set off like a hurricane that almost blew Pete’s and Bob’s ears off.

The opener was *Hey Ho My Joe*—a wild and ferocious version. Ron maltreated the guitar, the bass boomed like a paddle steamer from the Mississippi and the stage floor shook under the beats of the drums. Bob was thrilled and would have liked to take out his mobile phone to record the concert. Pete also nodded at Bob, impressed.

When Jupiter arrived shortly afterwards, he had to shout loudly to get his friends’ attention.

“Did you find out anything?” shouted Pete.

“Later!” shouted Jupiter.

“What?”

“Later!”

“An attacker?”

“Noooo! We’ll talk later!”

“What? A traitor?”

Jupiter waved his hand to stop more questions.

After the first booming songs, the programme got a bit quieter. For this, Lenny sat down on a wooden box and switched to the acoustic guitar. They played three quiet songs, then Robert Byrd climbed on stage and sang a more rocking duet with Lenny. At the end of his performance, Byrd improvised a hearty *Happy Birthday* song, hugged the birthday boy and applauded him personally. Byrd left the stage to great applause.

Then Lenny surprisingly pointed at Pete and said: “There’s a guy standing there with a Black Prints T-shirt! The next song is for you, Pete! And after that, folks, we will begin to wind down this very special concert leading to the highlight for today—*The Disappearing Hobbit!*”

The song with the fog generator—it flashed through Bob’s mind.

But first, Lenny launched into *Wonderful Dream* by the Black Prints, a song Pete liked a lot, and the band got right into it. They played the version a little slower and more demonic than the original.

After the first verse, Lenny put his guitar aside. He sat on the box again, armed only with his microphone, into which he croaked, sang and whispered in his raspy, powerful voice in a way that could hardly be more convincing.

Pete took a deep breath and swayed to the rhythm. A few people lit their lighters. The fog generator was already spewing out grey clouds that enveloped Lenny until he was only dimly visible.

The drummer intensified the atmosphere and Ron let the guitar wail so loud that it pounded the ears. The fog became thicker and thicker. The lighting changed and slipped into cool blue colours. Pete lifted his head and looked up at the clear night sky directly above him. He closed his eyes with pleasure.

Suddenly there was a shrill scream!

Pete’s eyes snapped open.

He just saw Lenny throw his arms up, let go of the mic and sink into the floor of the stage at the same moment.

For a brief moment, the music stopped. The smoke continued to steam, but Lenny was no longer sitting on the box.

“The surprise!” said Jupiter, staring at the stage.

But wasn’t that too soon? Bob wasn’t expecting it yet with this song. It was supposed to happen during *The Disappearing Hobbit!*

Immediately afterwards, the electric guitar howled again, bass and drums fell in. Bob stared at the spot where Lenny had just been sitting. The box had also disappeared.

Bob’s gaze turned to the musicians, who looked around in surprise as they continued to play. Were they as surprised as the audience or had they rehearsed it all?

“Come on, Lenny!” someone yelled. “I’ll buy you a beer!”

Some people shook their heads in wonder, others clapped.

“Encore!” someone shouted. “Hey, Lenny!”

The musicians continued to play, but Bob felt more and more that something was wrong. He looked around in search of Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus and saw Sue Tamara pushing her way energetically through the guests.

“What are you doing, Lenny?” The blonde woman walked right past The Three Investigators and climbed up onto the stage. “Lenny! Lenny?”

The bassist stopped his playing, but Ron on guitar and Keith on drums continued their work unperturbed. Shaking his head, Morning-Joe rejoined the other two.

The buzz of voices in the audience swelled. The three musicians increased the volume and repeated the same riff for at least the twentieth time. Strangely, Ron kept staring in the

direction of the fountain, as if Lenny's ghost was about to appear.

But nothing of the sort happened.

Meanwhile, Sue Tamara was trudging back and forth on stage, addressing Keith, who just shrugged his shoulders. She then yelled: "Lenny! Where on earth is that thing?"

She frantically searched the floor, finally bent down and picked up what looked like the remote control of a TV set. She straightened up and pressed a button. "Lenny! Where are you?"

A trap door in front of her opened up. The wooden box came up through the opening... but Lenny was not there!

5. The Strange Letter

Angrily, Sue dropped the remote control on the floor. “I’ve got to find Lenny,” she shouted. “Ron! Joe! Keep playing for the people. Anything! This is driving me crazy!”

“Wait, Sue!” Jupiter cried. “We... we’re coming with you!”

Sue Tamara had heard him despite the music and turned around. “You?”

“We are investigators! We’ll help you search!”

“Okay. Come on, guys!” She climbed off the stage and pointed to the house. “That way! It’s probably all just a stupid joke by Lenny! Could have at least let me in on it! ... Unless something has happened to him...”

Jupiter nodded to Pete and Bob and together they followed her. Several people stepped in Sue’s way and talked at her, but she shook them off impatiently. Shortly afterwards, she reached a door and stepped into the house.

“Sue, what is this special set-up on the stage?” asked Jupiter as she held the door open for The Three Investigators.

“Lenny loves surprise effects like that,” Sue said. “At the big shows, he just disappears into the fog, but here he wanted to do something special. Come on, we have to go through the living room and down the hallway.”

The Three Investigators entered. The inside of the house was also designed in a log cabin style. Brown logs lying crosswise dominated the walls. A fire blazed in a fireplace set in stone. As interesting as Lenny’s private realm was, the three of them had no time to look around. Sue had already gone into the hallway on the right, and the boys had to hurry to follow her.

“What exactly is under the stage?” Jupiter continued his questioning while running behind Sue.

“Basically just a machine to lower him down to a room under the stage!” Sue Tamara shouted as she turned a corner, and there was a flight of stairs leading down. “We’re going to the basement!”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Jupiter asked: “Where do this corridor lead to?”

“One end is under the stage, the other at the fountain.”

“At the fountain?” repeated Jupiter, astonished.

In the meantime, they ran down the corridor towards the stage. “That’s right. That’s where Lenny was supposed to reappear—after he vanishes during the *Hobbit* song.”

“What did he tell you about the planned performance?” asked Jupiter.

Sue stopped. “Why are you asking so many questions? Didn’t you say you want to help me?”

“Help can come in many ways,” Jupiter explained.

“I’ll answer your questions later!” retorted Sue. “We’re looking for Lenny! Come on!”

They reached a wooden door set into the wall, standing ajar. It was dark behind it. Basses were booming.

“We are at the room under the stage,” Sue said. Carefully she pulled the door open, obviously afraid of seeing something she didn’t want to see—Lenny with a broken leg, for

example, or worse.

She entered the room, and The Three Investigators followed her. Her hand gripped the inside wall, and flicked the switch a few times but the light did not come on. "Why isn't the light on?" she wondered. "Perhaps the bulb fused... all happening at the wrong time!"

"Wait!" Jupiter pulled out a flashlight and gently pushed her aside. He shone the light into the room. "As far as I can see, nobody's here!"

"It can't be!" Sue exclaimed.

Slightly offset from the centre of the room was the lift machine with an electric motor to transport the box to and from the stage. Directly above them was the wooden stage floor where Ron and Morning-Joe was still trudging across, working their instruments. It was as loud as could be. The wooden platform vibrated to the rhythm of the drummer's beats. Ron was singing some song. Only muffled voices could be heard from the audience.

"It's not supposed to be like that!" Sue cried against the noise.

"Which way is out to the fountain?" asked Pete.

Sue pointed outside the door and said: "There. You just go back out and follow the corridor all the way to the other end where there is a short ladder up to a trap door that opens out to the fountain."

"I'll go and see," Pete decided. "Jupe, the flashlight please!"

Pete ran out along the corridor to the other end, with Bob and Jupe following him. Lenny had built the corridor such that even a huge guy like him could run through comfortably.

On reaching the end, Pete saw the ladder leading upwards to a vertical trap door. He climbed up the ladder and inspected it. It had a padbolt but it was unfastened and unlocked. He pushed the trap door open and looked out. He was at the fountain.

Just then, Bob and Jupiter came up from behind.

"The trap door is unlocked and opens out to the fountain," Pete reported. "That's all. Lenny could have got out this way."

Next to the ladder was a grille door which was locked using a padlock. They could hear a humming sound coming from the other side of the door. That had to be the pump for the fountain.

"Let's go back to the room," Jupiter decided. "Maybe we'll find a clue—a scrap of cloth or something."

The three of them went back along the corridor and met Sue in the lift machine room.

"Anything at the fountain?" she asked.

"No," Jupe replied. "Nobody is there."

Next to Lenny's lift machine, Jupiter bent down and lifted something. "A piece of wire," he muttered. He rolled it up and put it in his side pocket.

Then he shone the light on the machine from top to bottom and walked around it.

Suddenly, he gave a surprised shout. "Here's a message!" Jupiter picked up an envelope by the edges. On it was written: 'For Sookie' in big letters.

"Sookie—is that you, Sue?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes... that's what he calls me sometimes," Sue Tamara said and wanted to take the envelope.

"Wait!" Jupiter shouted decisively. From his trouser pocket he dug out two rubber gloves. "For possible fingerprints! Bob, your pocket knife!"

"Here, Jupe!"

"You really are professionally equipped," Sue marvelled, "but there's no need for that here! It's a letter from Lenny!"

“Please, Sue!” Jupiter had slipped on his gloves and took the envelope. “There are few things I hate more than making an obvious and avoidable mistake and then not being able to rectify it later!”

“Er, yes,” Sue said.

Carefully, Jupiter and Bob slit open the envelope. It contained a folded sheet of paper, which Jupiter slowly pulled out and opened.

It was a computer-printed message, but signed by hand.

Jupiter held the letter to Sue and Pete shone the light on the page. Sue read the message aloud haltingly:

Hey, Sookie,

Sorry for this thing I’m doing, but you know how stubborn I am. I wanted to do the disappearing Lenny number in a really big way. I’m taking off, Sookie, but only for a couple of days. Got a plan for a little trip. So don’t worry about it. I’ll bring you back something nice!

Love, Lenny.

P.S. Say hello to the guests and The Three Investigators.

The last two lines were handwritten.

“Lenny, you—” exclaimed Sue angrily. She gasped for breath. “Why didn’t he let me in on this! Surely there’s another woman behind this!”

“Was there occasionally something... with others...” Jupiter asked.

Sue Tamara shook her head. “Oh, what do you know!” She calmed down a little. “He had a girlfriend once for a short time many years ago.”

“Do you know her name?”

“Are you going to question her?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “We are an investigation agency, but we only deal with criminal cases. You won’t snoop on relationships, nevertheless, the fact could be significant.”

“Debbie Peterson,” Sue said. “Resident of Malibu.”

“Thank you.”

Bob had another question in mind. “This letter,” he began, “could it be that someone else wrote it?”

Sue Tamara looked at him, puzzled. “I didn’t doubt its authenticity. Lenny sits at the computer all the time. It’s all his tone of voice... and he only calls me ‘Sookie’ when we are among very close friends... Also the signature...” She looked at the paper. “It looks real, if a little shaky... and the handwriting is his.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Why did he mention us in the message?” he said thoughtfully. “Did he actually tell you about our investigation agency?”

“He mentioned it... but only in passing.”

Jupiter briefly screwed up his face as if he had felt a sting. He folded up the paper again and wanted to put it in the envelope. “May I keep this for now?”

“Okay, but give it back to me when you’re done with it,” said Sue Tamara.

“We should check on Lenny’s car,” Pete suggested. “Where is it usually parked?”

Now Sue started to move again. “We have several cars in the garage!” Abruptly she ran off.

They hurried back up the stairs into the hallway and crossed it until they reached a steel door. It was also ajar.

“Strange,” Sue murmured. “He must have been in a hurry. He usually locks it.”

She opened the door wider and all of them stepped in. The fluorescent lights in the garage were shining and the automated door to the outside was wide open. There were four parking spaces in total. Only two were occupied. A shiny old Porsche and a new Camaro were parked there.

“Lenny said that his SUV is in the workshop after the accident,” said Pete. “There’s a car on two bays, so there’s a car missing! Is that right, Sue?”

Sue nodded. “He took the Chevrolet!”

6. A Few Inconsistencies

“Why did Lenny drive off in that old Chevrolet and not one of the sports cars?” wondered Sue Tamara. “—Especially his hybrid Camaro, which he usually prefers to drive.”

“The Chevy is less conspicuous,” Bob suggested. “Who knows what Lenny is up to.”

“Lenny may not have staged his own disappearance,” Jupiter said.

Sue shook her head. “You really believe that there is some sort of a crime? Lenny wrote me that letter, and his car is gone!”

“But there are a few inconsistencies,” Jupe replied.

“Inconsistencies?” Sue wondered. “What do you mean by that?”

“I had understood that previously, he does the disappearing act during the *Hobbit* song,” Bob said.

“That and also other little things,” Jupe added, “for instance, the open door to the garage. Was he in such a hurry? Why didn’t he let you in on his plans? There’s also Tim Durnell’s wound on the head.”

“He bumped into a tree, I heard,” Sue said.

“I had a good look at the tree,” Jupiter said. “Durnell should have been tiptoeing. The branches are quite high... and even if he should have bumped into a branch, why was the wound on the side of his head and not in the front?”

“Maybe he turned because he heard a noise,” Bob said. “He missed the branch and—bang—he rammed into it.”

“But what does all this have to do with Lenny?” asked Sue Tamara.

“Maybe nothing, but we’ll find out.” Jupiter took a step towards the main exit. “Which way did Lenny usually drive out from here?”

“I’ll show you. Follow me!” Sue Tamara went out the automated garage door. A narrow driveway followed, leading past the side of the car park and then towards the large exit gate, which was now closed.

“Tonight we set the system to automatic exit,” Sue explained. “When a car passes a certain point, it triggers a sensor, similar to a traffic light. The gate opens, the car leaves our premises and thirty seconds later, the gate closes again.”

“Shouldn’t we have heard that?” asked Bob.

Sue shook her head. “The gate is well oiled and moves very quietly.”

“And then with the noise,” Pete said. “Well, I mean, with the music!” Even on this side of the house, the song the three Moonlight Star musicians were playing could still be heard very loudly.

Bob nodded, turned around and counted the cars. There were twenty-four, just like before. That meant that no one else had left the compound—at least not by car.

“Are there any other entrances to your property?” Bob asked Sue Tamara.

“Yes, one. You can get to Joe’s and Ron’s houses out the back, but only on foot, they have their own driveway,” Sue said. “What do I tell our guests now?”

“The truth,” Jupiter replied. “At least as we know it. You can say that Lenny surprised us and that he tried to escape by means of a trick. Done... and, of course, greetings to all!”

Sue even laughed a little. “You’re a real sweetheart, Jupiter! Well, I guess I’ll have to go do it!”

As they had done a good two hours earlier, they walked around the house again and then towards the stage, which had now so mysteriously lost its host.

Just then, Sue Tamara hesitated and held The Three Investigators back.

“I can’t get the inconsistencies out of my mind,” she said. “I don’t want to miss anything but I also don’t want to involve the police. Lenny would kill me, especially if there’s really nothing behind it!”

“We understand, Sue!” Jupiter said. “—But that’s how we would do it!”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re asking us to take care of things. One moment, please.” He rummaged in the inside pocket of his jacket. “Here’s our card!”

Laughing, Sue Tamara took it and looked at the card. “Jupiter Jones, you must be the kind of person who gets the highest marks in school, aren’t you?”

“—Except in sport,” Pete remarked.

“I’m not used to people like that, but in your case I’d like to make an exception!” Sue said. “Do you want to spend the night here tonight? Then you can have time to a look at everything again—below the stage, garage, computers, entrances...”

Jupiter beamed. “Sure, we just have to convince my aunt. She’s in charge of supervising the three of us today.”

“Let me handle that,” Sue said, turning around.

When The Three Investigators mingled with the party guests again, they immediately sensed the uncertainty that prevailed. Although the band continued to play without their famous lead singer, hardly anyone was paying attention to them. People were chatting, perplexity written on many faces, which turned into uncertain curiosity when they spotted Sue Tamara.

Sue climbed onto the stage and asked the musicians to be quiet. Lenny’s microphone was still lying on the floor and she picked it up. An eerie silence fell.

“Dear friends and guests,” Sue said. “Lenny... well Lenny rocked out a real surprise today! Well, guys, what can I say—he has left, just left! Just like when he left home at seventeen! That’s probably what you do when you turn sixty-five, or maybe the congratulations went to his head. I suspect he’s avoiding opening presents and saying thank you... but seriously, Lenny went off on a birthday trip all by himself. You know him and his stubbornness! I’m supposed to say hello to you all! And now celebrate without him. Celebrate his music and, of course, enjoy yourselves!”

A few people laughed, others shook their heads in wonder.

Sue waved to the audience, talked briefly to the musicians and walked off the stage.

The musicians put down their instruments and fired up recorded music—a potpourri of hits from the past sixty-odd years that would bring the evening to a close.

The Three Investigators had stood around one of the tables and put their heads together.

“Jupe! You didn’t ask us just now!” Pete complained.

“Do you want to stay here today? But that’s what you want!”

“That’s not the point, Jupe! You can’t just decide for us all the time!”

“But if I already know what you—”

“Jupe!”

“Okay, okay! Do you want to take Sue Tamara’s assignment and investigate the case?”

“Of course,” said Bob.

“All right, I’m in too,” Pete said, “but what makes you so sure it’s a case?”

“Because I just don’t believe in Lenny’s voluntary disappearance!” said Jupiter. “Think about it. Lenny shows up at the salvage yard and hands us that package. He makes remarks about his interest in investigation work. He announces a surprise. Then he has that strange accident... and finally he does his trick on a different song. What’s left is a computer-printed note addressed to Sue.”

“You think his car was rigged?” asked Pete.

“Indeed! And I also have an idea where the tampering might have happened!”

Jupiter could not complete his train of thought because Tim Durnell came to the table. A huge plaster was stuck to the side of his head. Nevertheless, he was already holding another drink in his hand. “Great that the rascal is gone,” he said and raised his glass.

“Lenny?” Bob asked back. “Do you perhaps know more about his... uh... departure?”

Tim raised his hands defensively and his drink spilled over. “Me? You think I had something to do with it? Nah, guys... As far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t have to show up again, and I’m truly not the only one who would want that!” Durnell lowered his voice. “Even his own band keeps having trouble with him after all—Ron, Joe, Keith, all of them! A perfect world on the outside, but on the inside... they even wanted to break up the band once! It was all about money and stuff.” He stopped suddenly and stared up at the night sky.

“Go on!” Jupiter urged.

Durnell shook his head. “No, no, not everything you hear has to be true. I didn’t say anything, guys! I don’t want any trouble, I’ve got enough for tonight... and... uh... thanks for your help back there.”

“You’re welcome,” Pete said.

“Oh man, I’m out of here. My head is buzzing like a bee hive!”

“You’d better let someone drive you home,” Jupiter suggested.

“I know, I know, it’s not a problem. Mr Clayton is taking me back.”

“The man in the satin suit?” asked Jupiter.

“Yes, exactly. I met him here at the party. He didn’t even know why he was invited. Maybe Lenny’s going senile... Now, where is the good man?” Tim looked around, spotted Sax Sandler two tables away instead of Clayton and staggered towards him.

Bob looked at him going away. “I’m kind of sorry about that guy. We need to find out who was missing from the party when Durnell went out to the car park.”

“Lenny wasn’t there anyway,” said Jupiter.

“Lenny?” Pete said.

“He was coming towards me when I was going to the toilet... and he wasn’t coming from the party!”

7. The Fake Waiter

“You mean Lenny waylaid Durnell and got back at him for that beer-splash attack?” asked Pete, propping his arms on the cocktail table.

“Well, I don’t know...” Jupiter shrugged his shoulders.

A song from the seventies was playing. Some of the guests were happily ordering beer, others were already preparing to leave. The wind had become stronger and Pete had also put on his jacket.

Jupiter continued: “The thing with Lenny and Durnell may be a coincidence, but it’s far from the only thing that’s got me thinking. Have you looked at the people from B&Lunch?”

“The pretty waitress?” asked Pete. “Of course! There she goes. I could use another drink right now!”

Jupiter looked at Pete annoyingly. “I mean the others from B&Lunch. I can see you haven’t, but luckily I’m here.” Jupiter leaned forward. “You do remember Uncle Titus asking how many of them are here for this service?”

“Yes,” Pete replied, “and the waitress said he need not wait too long for the service.”

“Exactly, but that’s not my point. She said there were five of them—five people, but while I was looking around here, I noticed six different people wearing a white jacket! Three women and three men!”

“You mean she lied?” asked Pete.

Bob shook his head. “No. What Jupe is trying to say is that someone else sneaked in!”

“Yes. That’s my guess—and it’s another inconsistency I found. I suggest we talk to the members of the band next. They must know what was on the playlist and whether Lenny had planned to disappear during *Wonderful Dream*—as the surprise.”

The pretty waitress came over. Pete smiled at her and grabbed a Coke from her tray.

At that moment, Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda peeled out of the crowd. “There you are!” shouted Jupiter’s uncle. He held a half-full beer glass in his hand, which he now placed on the table. “We were going to go soon, after Lenny went off in such a strange way. I hear you three are not leaving yet.”

“Well, we received an invitation to spend one night here—a night on Moonlight Star! That’s hard to turn down,” Jupiter said.

“But you don’t have any toothbrushes with you!” Aunt Mathilda interjected energetically, “and what about pyjamas?”

“Oh, Aunt Mathilda! It doesn’t matter for one night...”

“I’m sure there won’t be a shortage of toothbrushes around here,” Uncle Titus said quickly. “Boys, I’m proud of you for wanting to help Sue clean up after the party, now that Lenny’s not here!”

“Uh, yeah, sure!” said Jupiter.

“That goes without saying,” Bob added.

“We always clean up at the salvage yard,” Pete commented.

Aunt Mathilda stared at the Second Investigator. “—But only after I have asked you a hundred times! Anyway, I don’t want to belittle your helpfulness. What time will you be back tomorrow?”

"It'll probably be... later..." said Jupiter. "Say around noon?"

His aunt nodded. "All right. I'll bake your favourite pizza," she said.

"Thank you, Aunt Mathilda," he said.

Jupe turned around and saw that the three musicians were still among themselves. In a few moments, they would probably be surrounded by curious guests and it would be difficult to get to them.

"—And now, unfortunately, we have to do something. Come on, fellas," Jupe urged.

"Go on, Jupe," said Aunt Mathilda. "I'm pretty tired of this anyway. Come on, Titus!"

They said goodbye and Jupiter immediately pulled his friends towards the stage.

Now only the guitarist and the bassist were standing there together. The muscular Keith had just gone off somewhere. Ron and Morning-Joe were having a heated discussion.

"Hi!" said Jupiter.

Ron took a step to the side. "Hi," he said reluctantly. Out of his sharply cut eyes he stared dismissively at Jupiter. The intrusion didn't seem to suit him. Then his eyes fell on Bob and his expression brightened a little. "Don't you work for Sax Sendler?"

Bob nodded. "Every now and then, yes. I've helped organize a gig for Moonlight Star before. I remembered it was once when you performed without Lenny."

"Exactly! I guess we'll have to do that again from now on! Thank you, Lenny, thank you!" He laughed bitterly and checked the elastic on his braid.

"So Lenny surprised you as much as he surprised us and the audience?" asked Bob.

"Indeed! He could have said something! Made us look like complete idiots!"

"He was going to disappear during the *Hobbit* song," added Morning-Joe, "and then emerge from the fountain and give a cracking speech!"

"So it all happened one song too soon?" Jupiter asked.

"Two songs, actually," Morning-Joe said. "He had another number planned in between!"

Interested, Jupiter remarked: "Between *Wonderful Dream* and *Hobbit*, there was to be another song?"

"That's right."

A waiter from B&Lunch came by and the two musicians took a beer. Bob tried to remember the waiter's face. If someone wanted to be among people somewhere and still not stand out, it had to be a waiter. Most of the guests looked over them and only paid attention to their service, not as individual people.

"What was that song?" Jupe asked.

"A typical Lenny surprise!" said Morning-Joe. "It was brand-new—a ballad. We'd only been rehearsing the number for three days, but Lenny was all over it!"

"What were the lyrics about?" asked Bob.

"Man, we've played this maybe only three, four times... What do you think, Ron?"

Ron glanced around the area sullenly and said: "Didn't listen that closely. Had to concentrate pretty hard on my riffs—uh... it was something about a guy apologizing to his brother for something."

"Anyway, the song was called the *La-La Song*," Morning-Joe said, "or something like that."

The Three Investigators looked at each other. The *La-La Song*? The sheet music had been among the papers in the package. It simply could not be a coincidence.

"Is that it, boys? I'm going over to Annie's then," Ron said and turned away.

"Just a moment!" Jupiter asked.

But Ron was already no longer listening.

"Damn all this," said Morning-Joe. "Poor Sue!"

“Yeah, she’s pretty messed up,” Jupiter said. “So there was no sign that Lenny wanted to run away?”

“No, but Lenny is a tough cookie. Sometimes he plans something in his head and only comes out with it at the last moment. That can be really annoying!”

“We’re used to that as well,” Pete remarked.

Jupiter gave him a sideways glance.

“Still,” Morning-Joe continued talking, “it doesn’t fit somehow. So why was he so keen for us to rehearse the new song?” He took a long sip. “All right, boys, go talk to some other people, please! I’m going over to my wife! She’s annoyed!” The bassist scratched the crown of his hair and left.

The Three Investigators were among themselves again.

“The whole thing is getting weirder and weirder,” Jupiter said. “Actually, there are only two possibilities—either there’s a crime behind all of this, or Lenny is up to something in which he has deceived even his closest confidants.”

“But how are we supposed to get anywhere?” asked Pete.

Bob looked past him at the empty stage. “We need to gather all the facts we have,” he said. “Maybe then a connection will emerge that we haven’t seen yet. Above all, we should look at this *La-La Song*. Jupe, you photographed the sheet music earlier. Do you have the photos with you?”

Jupiter shook his head. “Unfortunately no.”

“Too bad—tomorrow then...” Bob remarked. “As for tonight, when the guests have gone, we’ll have a good look around Moonlight Star.”

“It’s going to be a long night for sure!” Pete, who had his back to the stage, rolled his eyes and yawned. “—And I wanted to study maths all day tomorrow!”

“Huh?” Jupiter and Bob expressed at the same time.

“Just kidding, fellas! Actually, I want to go surfing in Malibu! The waves are supposed to be gigantic!” He looked up dreamily and suddenly seemed to freeze somehow.

“Pete, are you feeling sick?” asked Bob.

The Second Investigator was still looking up. “There’s a surveillance camera over there, fellas,” he said. “It must have recorded everything!”

8. Video Evidence

Jupiter and Bob turned around and looked up. Sure enough! The camera was hanging on the log cabin, just below the roof. Its lens was pointed at the stage.

“Let’s hope the camera was switched on,” Jupiter said. “Maybe we’ll find a clue that will help us when we go through the recordings!”

They looked around for Sue Tamara, but the hostess was involved in an intense conversation with the guest who had already caught Jupiter’s eye on arrival—Mr Clayton, the man in the satin suit with the swanky watch. Like Lenny, he was an elderly man. Now he wore gold-plated glasses studded with precious stones.

Again the waitress came over. Jupiter took the chance to ask her a question: “Excuse me, you said earlier that there were five of you tonight?”

“From B&Lunch?” she asked. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I suppose three women and two men?”

“Correct,” the woman said, looking suspiciously at Jupiter. “Why do you want to know?”

“I had noticed three different men wearing a white jacket.”

“Well observed! One of the guests really does look a bit like us, but he’s not with us! Earlier, he even grabbed a tray with glasses and went around the guests with it, but I told him we’d handle it! There are always impatient people...”

“Is the man still here?”

“I haven’t seen him for a while. Was that it?”

“Yes, thank you,” Jupiter said and the waitress turned away to continue walking. The First Investigator waited until she was out of earshot, then he grinned meaningfully at his friends. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“What did the man look like?” asked Pete.

“Unfortunately, I only saw him twice, and that was from a distance, but the jacket seemed to me to be a little different from the real waiters’.”

“We could look around for him,” Bob suggested, “and besides, you haven’t told us yet where Lenny’s car could have been tampered with.”

Jupiter looked at his friend challengingly. “That’s right, I forgot. So what do you suspect?”

“When you ask like that...” Bob pondered, “at the salvage yard. He probably drove straight there, of course. Then it was when Lenny was with... us?”

“Correct, Bob! Remember the man who was rummaging through the books when we were talking to Lenny?”

Bob nodded, only Pete had not noticed him.

“He came in a van and parked in such a way that Lenny’s car was obscured by it,” Jupe continued. “I had the impression that there was a second person in the van. It would therefore have been possible for the second person to have tampered with Lenny’s car without being noticed! Only unfortunately we can’t check that anymore.”

It was over an hour before all the guests had left. At last, the three musicians from Lenny’s band had said goodbye.

Yawning heartily, Jupiter, Pete and Bob offered to help their hostess tidy up, but there wasn't much to do at all. The B&Lunch staff did most of it, and according to Sue, another crew would collect the party furniture the next morning.

By now, The Three Investigators were dog-tired, but that was about to change as they sat with Sue Tamara on the leather couch in the huge living room with an ice-cold Coke. The fire was still crackling in the fireplace and the walls of the log cabin radiated a rustic cosiness. Now Jupiter asked about what interested him most at the moment.

"Yes," Sue confirmed, "the camera was on!"

"I thought recordings of all kinds were forbidden," Pete interjected.

Sue nodded. "Yes, as far as the guests are concerned... and mainly it's because Lenny doesn't want any private stuff popping up on the Internet afterwards. After all, there are some celebrities gathered here and the temptation is great! That's also why he didn't invite any press except for a close friend who is a music journalist. What about you guys? Did you really not make any recordings? Be honest!"

"No," said Jupiter. "After all, we are guests here and appreciate the invitation!"

Sue laughed. "Not everyone knows how to behave like that."

"We would like to look at the camera footage," Jupiter said. "Maybe we'll find a clue."

"No problem! Come along!"

They left the living room. As they walked down the hallway, Sue listed which rooms they passed. "Study, a complete recording studio, and here is a small security room where the camera recordings are kept."

"Are there more cameras?" asked Pete.

"Two at the entrance area, but they are only directed at what is happening outside the gate. Otherwise, one more out the back by the path to Ron's and Joe's house. Lenny doesn't overdo it with these measures."

They entered the small room where a computer monitor was set up in front of the dark brown log cabin wall. Sue pointed to the only chair positioned in front of the screen. "I'm afraid there's only room for one of you. The rest will have to stand."

Jupiter cleared his throat, took a seat and nodded to Pete. "Please operate the equipment."

"Then I'll show you how to do it," Sue said. "While you're checking, I'll try again to get hold of Lenny on the mobile. He just won't pick up!"

When Sue had left the room a short time later, The Three Investigators began their investigation. First, they ran through the video in fast speed to get an overview of the material. The recording began about half an hour before the guests arrived and ended when Sue stopped it a few moments ago. All the time, the camera was fixed rigidly on the stage. They had a view of everything that was happening there, but unfortunately not of the guests. Only when someone walked directly past the edge of the stage did their head come into the picture from below.

"Too bad," Jupe said as he had hoped for more. "Pete, let's start again, please. Whenever something happens, switch to normal speed. I suggest I pay specific attention to Lenny during the concert. Bob, you watch anything that doesn't involve Lenny right now, especially Morning-Joe, and you, Pete, watch Keith and Ron."

They watched everything a second time. Before the concert began, they let the video run in fast speed again. Whenever someone walked through the picture, Pete switched the video to normal speed. Mr Clayton could be seen and Jupiter decided to ask Sue Tamara about him later. Various other people appeared.

"Stop!" cried Jupiter suddenly. "That's him!"

A man's head and collar had appeared at the bottom of the picture. It was the collar of a white jacket.

"Can you enlarge that?"

"Hold on, Jupe."

With the zoom, the picture became a little blurrier, but they could still make out the face quite well. The man had to be around sixty and wore darkened glasses. He was scratching his ear. On one finger was a large ring that reflected the light and flashed into the camera.

"The fake waiter," Jupiter said. "He's either an opponent of Lenny or his ally!"

"I'll take a screenshot," Pete said, clicking the mouse. "I can also print it out, wait..."

"Okay, go on!" said Jupiter as the sheet emerged from the printer.

Finally, Lenny entered the stage and gave his speech. Then the musicians appeared and the concert began.

Pete let it run faster until the moment when Lenny pointed to Pete's T-shirt. He switched to normal speed, set the sound to room volume and let the scene run through.

Lenny sang *Wonderful Dream* and the fog set in. Now Pete went into slow motion. Suddenly the trap door opened up under Lenny. The singer jerked his arms up and dropped the mic. Pete paused the recording.

They looked at the still picture. "Looks like he was caught off guard," Bob said. "Look at the reaction on his face!"

"—But that could also be because he knows it's about to go down," Pete said. He ran the scene back and forth a few times. Their impression remained that Lenny had not expected the trap door to open at that time.

"Did you notice anything wrong with the others?" asked Jupiter.

Bob and Pete shook their heads. They watched the scene several more times. "Ron has his eyes closed and is playing guitar, Morning-Joe is plucking his bass, staring thoughtfully in the direction of Lenny, and Keith is beating on his drums, looks briefly at Lenny and continues drumming."

"He looks twice at Lenny!" said Jupiter. "Then it happens."

Pete nodded. "—And Morning-Joe looks at Lenny all the time. Why shouldn't he. They're a band!"

"Hmm..."

In order to concentrate better on the images, they switched off the sound completely and watched what happened next—how Sue climbed onto the stage, picked up the remote control, operated the mechanism and raised the box again.

"Where did the remote control come from?" asked Bob. "Was it there earlier?"

"Good question, Bob!" Pete played the video back and forth and back. "It wasn't on the stage. Lenny must have had it in his jacket," he said. "In the fog, he pulled it out and operated the mechanism. When he fell, he just dropped it. It slid onto the stage. Eventually the fog cleared and it lay there. Sue picked it up. That's how it could have been."

"I don't believe it!" cried Bob. "Lenny isn't even holding the remote control when he throws his arms up!"

Bob took the mouse from Pete and replayed the scene of Lenny falling down the trap door.

"There!" Bob exclaimed. "In one hand, Lenny is holding the mic, the other hand is sort of on his knee, but he's not doing anything with it! And suddenly the trap door opens. It wasn't Lenny who activated it!"

Jupiter nodded. It was as Bob had said. Lenny sat on the box and sang his song. He looked completely relaxed. One hand held the mic, the other was on his knee, albeit dimly

visible... but it did not move. Then the trap door opened up and Lenny fell down. The fog lifted, and suddenly the remote control was there on the stage floor.

“But if Lenny didn’t use the remote, who did?” asked Bob. “A helper? An opponent? And how did that thing suddenly get on stage?”

They looked at the scene a few more times, but they found no answer.

“My eyes are burning!” said Pete finally. “We’re not going to solve this today.”

9. Shadows in the Night

The Three Investigators switched off the devices and left the security room. Sue Tamara met them in the hallway. “So, did you find out anything?”

“I’m afraid the questions are increasing instead of clearing up,” said Jupiter. “Sue, who is this Mr Clayton who was walking around the party telling everyone he didn’t even know how he got the honour of being invited?”

“Lenny really wanted him here,” said Sue. “It was very important to him! I don’t know why, perhaps he’s some influential guy—influential but unpleasant! Just the sort Lenny usually makes fun of!”

“You had a long conversation with him?” Jupe continued.

“Entertaining is good!” She laughed scornfully. “That was more of a monologue about why he quit his job and what he is looking for now.”

Jupiter nodded. “And do you know this man?” He held out the picture of the fake waiter to Sue.

She took the picture and looked at it. “I don’t know. Someone from B&Lunch?”

“Not exactly,” Jupiter replied. “The waiters don’t know him. My guess is that this man has sneaked in among the guests.”

“Sue, do you know how many remote controls are there for activating the trap door?” Bob took over.

“One, as far as I know...” Sue replied. “Why?”

“Well, from the security video, we believe that Lenny didn’t trigger the mechanism of the trap door himself,” Jupe said. “Do you know where the remote control was placed during the show?”

Sue Tamara looked at Jupiter in surprise. “He didn’t open the trap door himself? Well, I can’t tell you exactly. Either he carried the remote control with him or he hid it somewhere on the stage beforehand. You’ll have to ask Ron.”

“We will do that tomorrow,” Jupiter decided. “I suggest we go to bed now. Oh, I still have two questions: Does a certain *La-La Song* mean anything to you?”

“You give me one surprise after another. No. Never heard of it. Is that from Lenny?”

“And how has your relationship with Lenny been lately?” Jupiter wanted to know without answering Sue’s question.

Sue Tamara looked at Jupiter as if he had asked her if she would kindly hand over her house to him. “What is this to you?”

“I’m sorry, really,” Jupe said, “but it’s all very complicated. You know, I suspect there’s a whole separate story going on!”

“Lenny always had a stubborn head,” Sue said and continued a little more coolly: “We had a few discussions over the last few days. A guy called claiming to be Lenny’s son.”

“How old was this person?”

“Well, maybe around your age...”

“And then?”

“Lenny couldn’t believe it, but he wanted to take care of it.”

Jupiter took a breath. "Okay. I apologize again for my insistence, Sue, but I need to get as accurate a picture as possible."

"It's all right," Sue said peacefully. "I'll show you where your room is."

To do this, they had to go to the higher wing of the house. There, on the first floor, were the bedrooms, each with its own bathroom. Sue Tamara led The Three Investigators into a large room with a tastefully upholstered king-size bed against the side wall. "Will three of you fit in there? Otherwise one of you can use the couch."

"That's just fine," said Pete. "Due to certain physical conditions, Jupe will take the couch. Bob and I prefer the bed!"

"Gladly. Fresh towels and toothbrushes are on the shelf in the bathroom. What time do you want to get up?"

"Late!" said Pete.

"Early!" countered Jupiter. "We will do a detailed tour in the morning. However, I still have one question: How is the atmosphere in the band actually? Were there any tensions? Arguments?"

Sue yawned wanly. "You just can't stop asking, can you? Not even well past midnight! There are always ups and downs in a band like this, Jupiter. At the moment, the boys aren't getting on so well, I don't know why. Perhaps signs of wear and tear. Such things happen from time to time."

"Okay," said Jupiter. "Thank you. Good night, Sue."

"Good night, boys."

When Sue had left, Jupiter wanted to know what Pete had meant by 'certain physical conditions'.

"It's about the effects of gravity," explained the Second Investigator. "When you're on a bed, a gradient forms next to you like on a roller coaster—"

"Okay, that's enough," Jupiter said. "I'll take the couch."

One after the other, they each went briefly to the bathroom and then lay down. Although it was late, Pete could not fall asleep. Too many thoughts were running through his head. There was a light wind outside. Every now and then, a night bird cried out. The wood in the house crackled... and wasn't there a noise at the main door?

Pete tried to calm himself, lay down on his stomach and breathed in and out slowly. He knew that he sometimes reacted very anxiously. Slowly his thoughts turned into images that ran like a movie in his head—a car grazing a rock face; a man with a white jacket with plasters on his head; a remote control sliding around on the stage...

"Someone tried to stop Lenny from singing the *La-La Song*," Pete suddenly whispered brightly again. "Hey! Are you two asleep yet?"

Jupiter was just beginning to snore. Next to Pete, Bob rolled over onto his other side and grunted in his dream.

"Yeah, yeah, it doesn't make it any easier for me that you're already asleep!" Pete took a breath, lay on his back and tried to think of his surfboard. The next wave, yes, that was it! Swim up, get on the board...

Outside, a bird screamed again. Gone was the picture with the surfboard. Perhaps it was an owl, Pete guessed... No, not an owl. Was that a warning call? Pete turned on his side and listened. Those were footsteps out there! Footsteps on wood—on the stage! Now there was soft creaking sounds.

Pete sat up and rubbed his eyes. He was probably already hallucinating, but the footsteps could still be heard. Cautiously, he pulled the blanket aside and crept to the nearest window. The stage was directly below, but it was in the dark.

Pete stared out strained. He was probably mistaken. Jupiter was snoring peacefully and Bob was lying still, breathing very softly. Should he wake them? On a mere suspicion?

Just as he was about to turn away, Pete heard the footsteps again. He felt as if a shadow was moving, right under his window. Now he heard another sound, as if a door was being pulled shut.

“Jupe!” Pete hissed and ran to the couch. “Jupe! Wake up!”

“Huh?” Jupiter opened his eyes and tried to get his bearings.

“There’s someone outside the house, Jupe!”

“Okay” Jupiter replied. “Wake Bob up!”

Like lightning, Jupiter had got up and slipped into his clothes. “Leave the light off!” he ordered.

Pete shook Bob awake, which was not so easy.

“What’s the matter?” Bob complained indignantly. “What time is it?”

Pete did not need to answer. From somewhere, at first very quietly and almost inaudibly, then slowly swelling and becoming louder, a deep humming sounded through the house.

“What’s that?” asked Bob, startled.

“I don’t know,” Pete whispered. “It’s coming from downstairs.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it... but carefully,” Jupiter said. “Come on, fellas.”

“Slow down, Jupe!” said Bob, pulling on his jeans.

They crept out of the room. In the hallway, the sound was more audible. It sounded powerful and dark. Then something began to vibrate softly. Jupiter switched on his flashlight and shone it around. It was glasses standing on a chest of drawers.

Suddenly, someone shook the door on the other end of the hallway... but it did not open.

Bob walked to the door to check. “Sue?” he asked. “Is that you?”

“What are you doing? Did you lock the door?” shouted Sue from inside. “And anyway, what’s that noise?”

“We don’t know what’s going on either,” Bob hissed and turned the door knob. The door was really locked. “Shine the light over here, Jupe.” There was no key in the lock on the outside. “Don’t you have a key, Sue?”

“No. We don’t lock the door. There hasn’t been one here for a long time!” Her voice rose. “I want to get out of here, guys! I hate being locked up!”

“Wait,” shouted Bob, “we’ll find a solution! Come on, Pete, your lock picks!”

“Uh, yeah.” Pete rummaged in his trousers and took out his lock pick set. Bob took the flashlight from Jupiter and shone it on the lock for Pete. Carefully, the Second Investigator put the lock pick into the lock and looked for the right place for the resistance... but it turned out to be more difficult than expected.

“Go on!” urged Jupiter... but that only caused Pete’s movements to become more frantic.

“Someone must be hiding in the house,” Jupiter said. “That someone has locked Sue in and is making that noise down there. I need to know who it is! And what he’s up to!”

Pete turned to Jupiter. “The best thing is to call the police, Jupe!”

“No police here!” shouted Sue from the other side of the door. She had heard everything. “Who knows, maybe Lenny is playing a crazy trick on all of us. I’m beginning to think anything’s possible!”

“What if it’s not Lenny?” asked Pete quietly.

As before, the buzzing was clearly audible... but suddenly the sound blurred and an acoustic guitar peeled out of the sound. It played an intro unknown to The Three Investigators.

Suddenly, singing began. It was clearly the voice of Lenny!

“I knew it!” shouted Sue from the room. “What a nasty stunt you’re pulling, Lenny!”

Hey, little brother!

What’s really the matter?

The first lines of the lyrics sounded vaguely familiar to Bob. “The *La-La Song!*” he said. “I think that’s the song lyrics we had yesterday! Is Lenny sitting down there playing a wicked joke?”

“Maybe it’s all coming from a recording,” Jupiter said, impatiently stepping from one foot to the other. “I’ll go and see!”

“Jupe!” shouted Bob firmly. “I don’t care how curious you are. You’re staying here! It won’t be that much longer!”

“I will be careful,” Jupiter said. “You two settle the lock and then come right down!”

Without waiting for an answer, he turned around. Step by step, the First Investigator felt his way down the hallway until he came to the staircase leading down to the living room that connected one wing of the house to the other.

A strange red light penetrated up to Jupiter, whose source he could not explain.

10. The Soundproof Room

When Jupiter reached the bottom of the stairs, he stopped and looked around. Through a large, floor-to-ceiling window he could see out to where the stage must be, but he only stared into the darkness.

Now that he was down here, his hair stood on end. Lenny, or whoever it was, could be hiding somewhere, waiting for him. He just didn't know where.

Jupiter waited. The song ran in a continuous loop. First the chorus, then the verse:

*Up in the canyon in scorching heat;
Jamming the blues with Byrdy and Keith.
We wrote lots of songs until no end;
Together with the girls, we sure can.*

Then the guitar sounded and everything started all over again. The chorus, first verse and guitar part were constantly repeated. During the quiet parts of the song, Jupiter heard Pete fiddling with the lock. Normally he didn't take so long!

"Jupe?" That was Bob calling from above.

"It's okay, Bob!"

"Pete's not done yet, but shall I come down?"

"No need to!" Slowly Jupiter felt his way into the hallway. Now he could also see where the red light was coming from. It came through the gap in the door that led to the recording studio.

Was Lenny sitting in there singing his song?

Jupiter crept up to the door and peered inside. The recording studio was lit in a dull red and, as far as he could see from his position, there was nobody there. Obviously someone had turned on the sound system. So the song was indeed from a recording! But what was all that about?

Then the powerful chorus of the *La-La Song* started again. Jupiter drew in a breath. The others should be here in a moment, so he decided to venture in.

Gently, he pushed the door further open. The mixing desk now came into full view, and several indicators flickered on a control panel. To the left was a pane of glass behind which was presumably a soundproof recording room.

Jupiter entered the studio very slowly. Something bright flashed and it blinded him. Almost at the same time, he felt a blow. Jupiter sank to the floor. He had the vague impression that the door fell shut behind him. Then he sensed someone bending over him.

The next moment, his vision blurred into nothingness.

Meanwhile, outside Sue's room, after fiddling with his lock picks for a while, Pete turned the door knob. It opened! "I've got it," he said proudly.

Sue Tamara stepped out, wearing a long T-shirt. "Thanks, guys! Am I glad you freed me."

“Unfortunately, it wasn’t very easy,” Pete explained. “Somebody jammed a piece of wire into the lock. I had to dig that out first.”

“Let’s sort this out later, Pete,” Bob said. “First, let’s find Jupe! I have a feeling he’s in trouble.”

At that moment, the song became quieter and sounded muffled.

“Come on!” shouted Bob, “hurry up!”

Without taking any precautions, Bob, who still had the flashlight, ran to the staircase and went down the steps hurriedly. Pete followed him, then Sue. Only when Bob reached the living room did he stop. At a subdued volume, the song went on and on:

*Up in the canyon in scorching heat;
Jamming the blues with Byrdy and Keith...*

Bob shone his light around. An indoor palm tree came into the cone of light; then a Hawaiian guitar hanging on the wall; and a large face drawn with a thick line that reminded him of Bob Dylan.

“I can’t shake the impression that someone is watching us all the time,” Bob whispered.

Suddenly the ceiling light flared up. Pete and Bob flinched in fright.

But it was only Sue Tamara who had flicked the light switch. “Lenny?” she called out. “Lenny? I can hear you! Where are you, Lenny?”

The two investigators relaxed a little, but the question remained—where was Jupiter? Had he left the house?

Bob’s gaze fell through the large window out into the night. Moonlight Star was in a lonely area and was not particularly well secured. In the light, they were visible to any intruder from outside.

“Shall we split up?” suggested Sue. “Then we can search the house faster.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” Pete replied.

But Sue was not to be deterred. “One of you go look in the garage. You know where that is. The other one of you take the hallway with the recording studio, and I’ll go down to the basement and into the room under the stage.”

At that moment, the song died away—only to start again the next moment, but now the sound seemed to come from the basement!

“There’s someone in the basement!” said Bob. They stood still for a few seconds, not knowing how to react.

That’s when the lights went out! At the same time, it became abruptly quiet.

“It... someone has blown the fuse!” said Sue uncertainly.

“Where is the fuse box?” asked Pete. “Outside?”

“The property is old, but we have rebuilt everything. The fuse box is down the hallway right next to the steel door to the garage.”

Bob switched on the flashlight. “Whoever it is, that someone is trying to get an advantage over us!” he whispered. “I don’t like this at all!”

“And now what, Sue?” asked Pete. “Should we call the police?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “That was Lenny singing down there... and—”

“Never mind,” Bob interrupted. “We have to find Jupe! Now!”

“Then go find him! I’m going to the basement to look for Lenny!”

“Sue!” said Bob sharply. “I think—”

But Sue had already pushed past him and was feeling her way down the stairs to the basement. “Lenny?” she called. “Lenny?”

The First Investigator did not know how long he had been lying there. He was not tied up, as he was relieved to discover... but where was he? And why? His head ached. He wanted to look at his watch, but it was not there. Yes, right... he did not put it on when Pete urgently woke him up earlier.

Jupiter tried to think. What had happened? And why was there such a strange pressure on his ears? Or in other words, why could he hardly hear anything even when he moved?

"Where am I?" he said. It sounded strange. "Pete? Bob?"

There was some foamy stuff stuck to the walls... Finally it dawned on him—he was lying on the floor of the soundproof room and had headphones on! Jupiter pulled them off his ears and straightened up. Through the pane of glass embedded in the wall, he could see out of the soundproof room to the mixing desk. A faint, reddish light was shining.

In front of the mixing desk sat... Lenny, staring motionlessly at the console. His hair was tied back in a ponytail. It seemed to Jupiter that a sardonic smile was playing around his lips, but he couldn't be sure exactly. The light was too diffuse for that. The musician had obviously not noticed Jupiter.

"Lenny, what are you doing?" asked Jupiter. He lowered himself to the floor again and crawled towards the exit of the soundproof room. Carefully he raised his arm and turned the door knob.

It was locked—of course!

After Sue had left them, and before Pete and Bob could discuss how to proceed, they were taken by surprise again.

"Where am I?" a voice came to them.

"What was that, Bob?" asked Pete, pushing himself closer to his friend.

Then they heard the voice again. "Where am I?"

"That's Jupe!" cried Pete. "—And it's coming from the first floor! Why is Jupe suddenly up there?"

"Maybe there's another way up," Bob said, shining the flashlight frantically around the area.

"Pete? Bob?" Clearly that was the voice of the First Investigator.

"Here!" shouted Bob. "Here we are! Where are you, Jupe?"

"Pete? Bob?"

"But now that came... from around here!" said Bob in a trembling voice. "How—"

"Where am I? Where am I? Where am I?"

"Jupe is somewhere around us!" Pete gasped. "He's wandering around the room! But there's no one to be seen! What on earth is that? Bob! Let's get out of here!"

Suddenly, a bizarre laughter sounded that also seemed to travel through the living room—back and forth, and back and forth, faster and faster! Then the song started again:

*Up in the canyon in scorching heat;
Jamming the blues with Byrdy and Keith...*

"Wait!" shouted Bob. "I think I know what's going on!" He ran to the wall of the log cabin behind which the stage lay and shone his light upwards to the top of the large window. "See? There's a little speaker! And down there another one... there!" He turned around. "—And there! There too!"

They hadn't noticed it before, but Lenny had installed speakers all over the house. He had to be a sound fanatic who wanted to sound his house in all kinds of different ways.

"But it was Jupe who spoke just now!" said Pete. "Why about the audio equipment? And why do they work at all? The electricity is out, isn't it?"

"Probably it has its own power supply," Bob said. "Electricity can go out in the canyon, and Lenny doesn't want to depend on that when he's recording a song!"

"So Jupe is in the recording studio!" concluded Pete. "Let's go!"

Bob wanted to hold him back. "Something's wrong, though. The voice somehow sounded so... strange!"

Pete pulled Bob towards the recording studio. Strangely enough, the door stood open a little. Pete peered in. As far as he could see, the room was empty.

"Come!" he whispered. They entered. At the same moment, a scream rang out. It came from the basement.

It was Sue!

11. Theft at the Salvage Yard

Three hours had passed and dawn had set in. The Three Investigators decided to return to Rocky Beach. They said goodbye to Sue Tamara and set off in Pete's MG.

Along the way, Jupiter used his mobile phone to call Inspector Cotta, who had just woken up... and he was annoyed—very annoyed. Rather than Jupiter reporting to him on the phone, the inspector suggested that they meet at the salvage yard.

Now the road turned into a tight right-hand bend. In the back seat of the car, Bob was pushed violently from one direction to the other. The three of them only half-heartedly braced themselves against the centrifugal force because above all, they were fighting fatigue.

Finally, they were back at the salvage yard. Jupiter opened the main gate and let Pete drive in. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus had not even got out of the house yet. Probably they were still at breakfast, Jupe suspected. In any case, he did not want to disturb them.

The Three Investigators sat at the verandah of the yard office to wait for the inspector to come. Ten minutes later, a police car drove into the salvage yard. Cotta stepped out and joined the three at the verandah.

"So, now please tell me everything in order." Inspector Cotta yawned and wiped his hand over his face, which was still wrinkled from sleep.

Jupiter started telling the inspector all that had happened from the time Lenny visited the salvage yard handing them the package until the events early in the morning.

Then Pete took over: "Bob and I sneaked into the recording studio. We heard Sue's scream, but at the same time, the guy who looked like Lenny appeared with a gun and threatened us. He locked us in the soundproof room with Jupe."

"Why didn't you call the police much earlier?" Cotta wanted to know. "Right after Lenny's disappearance?" Instead of waiting for The Three Investigators to answer, he said almost in the same breath: "Let me guess! Jupiter Jones had a handful of far-fetched reasons not to do it!"

"You are mistaken, Inspector!" protested the First Investigator. "Where on earth did you get such an absurd idea? It was Sue Tamara who believed that it was a gimmick until the very end." He said nothing about the fact that the police were not exactly well regarded by Sue and Lenny.

"So why did she suddenly change her stand?"

"Because the Lenny who had been lying in wait for her in the basement smelled wrong!"

"What? He smelled wrong?" the inspector exclaimed. "What do you mean by that?"

"The guy looked like Lenny, but he didn't smell like her husband! That's when she knew it wasn't him... and at the latest when this Lenny brought Sue to us in the soundproof room, it was clear that something couldn't be right."

"Because there was another Lenny waiting in the recording studio—the one who locked you three up!"

"Correct!" said Jupiter. "My guess is that they donned well-made silicone masks of Lenny. The band had performed with such masks before."

"So you think the band members are behind it?" asked Cotta.

“—Or just one of them and Lenny himself,” Jupiter explained, “or it could be completely different people! Because anyone could create those masks.”

“Goodness!” Cotta remarked. “Why is the world always so complicated?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that, Inspector,” Jupiter said.

“Now there were four of us locked in the soundproof room,” Bob continued. “It was pretty stuffy in there, and it took quite a while before we could free ourselves...” He refrained from telling the inspector how they did that—through Pete’s lock picks, of course. The inspector did not ask either.

“By the time we managed to get out, there was no trace of the two Lennys!” Bob concluded.

“And how did you get the idea that they were at the fountain?” Cotta asked. “I don’t think you could hear anything from the soundproof room!”

“We suspected that the two Lennys wanted to look for something in peace and had locked us in the soundproof room for that reason,” Jupe took over again, “but everything in the house was tidy and in its place. That’s why we looked under the stage and Pete inspected the exit from the corridor to the fountain.”

The Second Investigator nodded. “I was about to turn away, but then I noticed that the padlock on the grille door to the fountain pump was cut, most likely with a bolt cutter. Whoever did it, put the padlock back as carefully as possible. I then opened the door and took a look inside. There was nothing suspicious.”

“We don’t know if this someone found what he was looking for,” Jupiter said. “We don’t know who it was or what it was about. Also unknown to us is whether Lenny planned everything or whether he was taken out of the way because he interfered with the action.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Usually you’re always smarter than everyone else!” Cotta remarked dryly.

“I do indeed find myself in that state of mind quite often,” Jupiter explained, “but to my chagrin, there are exceptions to the rule now and then! Everything is very mysterious.”

“And those surveillance videos,” Cotta asked, “so on one of them you can see the Chevrolet driving off the premises. There’s a person behind the wheel, but you can’t make him out. If Lenny was abducted, where is he? In the boot? Hidden in the back seat?” Cotta waited for a comment, but there was silence.

They were interrupted by Aunt Mathilda’s voice. “Is the police here?” she called out when she approached the yard office. “Oh, hello, Inspector Cotta! Have the boys done something wrong again?”

“No, Mrs Jones,” Cotta said, raising his hands reassuringly. “Everything’s fine—at least with the three boys, but I’d like to ask you and your husband a few questions!”

“Us? About what?”

“It’s about your observations during the time when Lenny disappeared from the stage.”

“Oh, so that’s what the three of them are investigating now,” Aunt Mathilda remarked. “Well, I almost thought that wasn’t right. That was a strange end to the concert! Titus is still in bed. Would you like a coffee while you wait?”

“A strong coffee would be a dream,” Cotta said and yawned.

The Three Investigators rubbed their eyes.

Cotta frowned. “Have you finished with what you wanted to tell me?”

Jupiter indicated with a nod.

“Then I suppose you had better go off and freshen up,” Cotta said. “I’ll talk to Mrs Jones now.”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob left the verandah, and instead of going to the Jones house, they sneaked to the discarded refrigerator known as the Cold Gate, and it was a secret entrance to Headquarters.

In the trailer, Jupiter mumbled: "Let's rest a bit first. I'm so tired!"

The next moment, the three of them each threw themselves onto a chair and fell asleep almost immediately.

Two hours later, Jupiter was the first to wake up. Inspector Cotta should have completed questioning Aunt Mathilda. The First Investigator decided to go to the yard office and retrieve Lenny's package.

Without waking his friends, he crept out of the trailer and into the salvage yard. The inspector's car was gone. Aunt Mathilda was attending to a customer, while Uncle Titus was nowhere to be seen. He must be out getting more junk. Slowly, Juve made his way to the yard office and fetched Lenny's package from the cabinet.

When he returned to the trailer, Bob had woken up. With glazed eyes, Jupiter handed Bob the package.

"What do you want to do with this?" Bob asked as he placed the package on the table and opened the cover. However, before Juve could reply, an exclamation from Bob brought him back to reality faster than he would have liked. "The sheet music is gone!"

"What?" Juve exclaimed, and that woke Pete up.

"The sheet music for the *La-La Song* is missing," Bob confirmed.

"Great!" Pete commented and yawned.

"Who knew anyone would be interested the song?" Bob wondered. "Someone must have broken into the yard office when we were at Lenny's concert. That was the opportunity, after all, nobody was here! The burglar grabbed the sheet music and packed the rest of the items back up so we wouldn't notice right away."

"Actually, it could have happened any time from last night to early this morning," Jupiter looked at Bob, stunned. "Like you said, who could have an interest in that song? Luckily we photographed everything!"

"And where are the photos?" asked Bob.

"Still in the camera, and it's in my room well hidden! I'll go get it now."

After breakfast, and once Jupiter got the camera, the investigators were ready for action again. By now the sun was in the sky. It reminded Pete that he actually wanted to go surfing today, but now he was curious about the *La-La Song*, of which they had only heard part.

Jupiter switched on the camera. The first thing he came across were the photos of Lenny and Aunt Mathilda on their verandah. He had wanted to check on something—and very soon, he spotted it!

"Come with me," he said and led his friends into the crime lab, where there was a laptop and a good colour printer. Uncle Titus had obtained the equipment at an office liquidation and Jupiter had refurbished them.

Jupiter started the laptop and inserted in the camera's memory chip. Then he clicked on the first photo. Lenny was grinning at them, his arm around 'Mathy'.

"How charming your aunt can smile!" commented Bob.

"Wait, this is not the photo I want you to see," Jupiter said. "There is a reason why I took three photos of them together. Watch the background of the first photo I took!"

Jupiter clicked to the particular photo and zoomed in on a spot in the background. The customer who had been rummaging in the book case could be seen. He was kneeling sideways next to the book case and he had his head turned towards them. By zooming in, the face became slightly blurred, but it was still recognizable.

“The fake waiter!” exclaimed Pete. “That’s the guy who sneaked into the party!”

“Yes, I realized that guy was in the first photo after I took it,” Jupiter continued, “so I changed my position a bit to avoid him for the next two photos.”

Jupiter printed out the enlarged section of the photo. “And his buddy, who was sitting next to him in the van, manipulated Lenny’s car! I’m almost certain of that. Maybe he was the burglar who stole the sheet music from Lenny’s package!”

“Then it must be an abduction,” Pete said. “Why would Lenny be in cahoots with a guy who almost killed him?”

“That’s what it looks like,” said Jupiter. He was visibly pleased with his discovery. “And now for the *La-La Song*...” He quickly found the photographs he took of the sheet music. The musical notes and lyrics spanned from one side of the paper to half of the reverse side. He printed three sets of the two pages—one set for each investigator. It was a good print. At the bottom half of reverse side, they could even see thinly pencilled scribbles that looked like a grocery list with prices. Apparently Lenny—or whoever the writer was—had written the song in a great hurry on a used piece of paper.

They sat down and read.

12. The *La-La Song*

The *La-La Song*

(Chorus)

*Hey, little brother!
What's really the matter?*

*It is what it is;
My life's a hit or miss.
You stay who you are;
Thanks to your lucky star.*

*Up in the canyon in scorching heat;
Jamming the blues with Byrdy and Keith.
We wrote lots of songs until no end;
Together with the girls, we sure can.*

*Keith and the rest went into the light;
However, you and me, we lost sight.
The canyon has so many ways out;
But we were always lost and in doubt.*

(Chorus)

*Here's the story of how it began;
That's when I got a tip from a man.
I don't even know that guy's full name;
But I still went along with his game.*

*I have always dreamed of something big;
Then I had this chance that came real quick.
Like an eagle, I really soared high;
To get some gold that's hard to come by.*

(Chorus)

*Offered him a third, which was quite fair;
But he wanted more, to my despair.
I grabbed all to hide in Avalon;
But it sank in a wild storm, all gone.*

*Life can really put you on the spot;
Sometimes you're lucky, sometimes you're not!*

*For me, it is over, I'll admit;
Take it brother, make the best of it.*

(2x Chorus)

"Wow!" Bob exclaimed when they had all looked at the lyrics. "I've heard that tune so many times at Lenny's place that it has become real catchy! It's already running in my head all the time!" He hummed away.

Pete covered his ears in disgust. "Stop it, Bob. I'm afraid you're no Lenny the Rock!" Then he turned to Jupiter. "The song is about stolen gold, isn't it?"

The First Investigator nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose, and the loot sank into the sea... but I wonder if it's all made up."

"Why not? It's just a song," said Pete, while Bob hummed undauntedly to himself.

"Didn't Bob say that Lenny had performed in a prison?" Jupiter recalled. "That's where he might have met the man the song was written about."

"In several prisons," Bob said suddenly, and Pete noticed with satisfaction that Bob could not hum at the same time when he spoke. "—Most recently just a few weeks ago, here in Los Angeles!" He pointed to the printout. "Is that even Lenny's handwriting?"

"Wait," Jupiter said. Carefully, with gloves on, he took out the note Lenny wrote to 'Sookie'. The last two lines were handwritten and Sue had said that the handwriting was Lenny's. The First Investigator compared the handwriting with that of the lyrics. It was a no-brainer.

"It's definitely not Lenny's handwriting on these two pages of the *La-La Song*," he concluded. "Consequently, the original could theoretically have its origin in the prison and come from the perpetrator! Then it might really refer to a real event."

Pete looked doubtfully at the lyrics, but with every line he read again, he believed more in Jupiter's theory. "Here's a guy singing to his brother, somewhat describing his life as a mess. That could refer to his involvement in a crime. He advised his brother to stay who he is. Then it's about the past, in the canyon. Jamming, that is, making music, with Byrdy and Keith... Would Byrdy be Robert Byrd, the songwriter? And Keith could be Keith Denver. It can't be a coincidence, so that means he knew the two of them."

"Looks like it!" interjected Bob eagerly. "They both went into the light, so they became famous—which is true—but the writer of this song didn't! From the looks of it, he went astray."

"Exactly!" said Pete. "Then he got some tip from an unknown person, and bagged some gold. He offered the tipster a share, but it was not enough. Eventually, he grabbed all the loot to bring to Avalon."

"Isn't that the mythical island that no one knows where it is?" Bob asked.

"You mean the island from Arthurian legend," said Jupiter. "King Arthur was healed there after he was wounded."

"Maybe not that but the city of Avalon on Santa Catalina Island," Pete interjected. "It could be that he wanted to hide his loot on the island!"

"That sounds plausible," Jupiter reflected, "but the plan went wrong, and the loot sank into the sea. The man was also caught and put in prison. There he wrote this song to his brother and it sounds almost like a confession and a plea for forgiveness. The brother should accept life and make the best of it—not like him, the criminal. That's how I interpret the song," he said and paused for a moment before continuing the thought: "It also sounds like he has given up hope."

“Yes, Jupe,” Bob agreed. “The song is a legacy of sorts!” He exhaled audibly and started humming again.

“You’ll spoil the whole song with your chirping!” said Pete.

“But I can’t get it out of my head!”

“I can change that!” Pete stood up, turned on the CD player and let it play a song by the Black Prints—and loudly. “But... as interesting as the *La-La Song* and its message are, what does that have to do with Lenny’s disappearance?” he yelled against the song.

“Lenny disappeared right before the band was about to play the *La-La Song*... and the two fake Lennys were looking for something on Moonlight Star,” Jupiter exclaimed. “Obviously it had to be something related to the song. Maybe the loot didn’t sink in the sea at the time? Or was it about the unknown tipster’s share? And can you please turn the music down a bit? Otherwise our secret headquarters will not be too secret for long!”

Bob stood up and turned the volume down.

“Maybe Inspector Cotta knows what’s up with the theory of the sunken loot,” Pete wondered. “He should know about such a story, and today he doesn’t seem quite so... so...”

“—Irritable,” Jupiter interrupted him. “You mean he doesn’t seem quite so irritable.”

“I suppose that’s what I mean,” Pete said. “So, are you going to check with him?”

Jupiter nodded, went to the phone and dialled Cotta’s number. The inspector did not pick up. So they asked for a call back on his voice mail.

“And now what?” asked Pete.

Jupiter grinned. “I suggest you go surfing in Malibu!”

Pete looked at him in amazement. “Okay... Do you want to take a break from investigation? You’re not actually serious, are you?”

“Well... you could take the opportunity to visit that Debbie Peterson—the alleged ex-girlfriend that Sue Tamara told us about.”

Pete screwed up his face. “So that’s what you’re up to! You want me to do a bit of groundwork while you take care of the important stuff here?”

Jupiter squirmed. “I admit that that is not a very promising lead, but we have to take care of every piece of information. That’s our duty! And if you have the time, you can go surfing afterwards... While you’re out, Bob and I will examine the envelope of Lenny’s note for fingerprints... and watch the video of Lenny’s disappearance again. Luckily we made a copy of it!”

“Can’t we just call this Debbie?”

“Pete! It’s far too easy to get rid of someone on the phone! And a look at her house can’t hurt either.”

Pete thought. His surfboard was in the car. Actually, the idea wasn’t that bad. Presumably Jeffrey and Kelly were also at the beach. “Okay,” he finally said.

It was another hour before Pete could set off in his MG for Malibu because Aunt Mathilda had made good on her promise and baked pizza. Of course, it had to be eaten first.

When Pete had left, Jupe and Bob retreated to the crime lab at the back of the trailer as they had discussed. The first thing they did was to check the envelope containing the note to Sue Tamara for fingerprints. To compare the prints, they had a whisky glass that Sue had given them.

“These are definitely Lenny’s fingerprints on the envelope,” Bob said after a while and put the paper aside. “I can’t find any other prints, whatever that means.”

Jupiter did not need to think long. “This fact does not help us in any way! Either Lenny put the letter in himself, or the abductor wore gloves and forced him to put the paper in the envelope. Another circumstance leads me much more to think that Lenny has been abducted!”

“—And what would that be?” Bob asked.

“His greeting to us! Why us, of all people? Why not the other more high-profile people, like Robert Byrd or Marsha Mellowes? I interpret that as a hint to us that there is something wrong and we should take care of it!”

“You mean he purposely mentioned us in the letter?”

Jupiter nodded.

“Then let’s go through the video again!” Bob said.

Again and again, they went through the crucial sequences. Most of all, Bob was interested in the mystery of the remote control that had triggered the mechanism to open the trap door.

“Where on earth was that thing if Lenny didn’t operate it?” Bob muttered, staring at the screen. “Come on, come on! Where was it? And who operated it?”

They ran the sequence several times until Bob suddenly had the idea to switch on the audio. The quality wasn’t very good, but the instruments could be heard clearly. Lenny sang, Morning-Joe’s bass thumped, Keith increased the beats, Ron’s guitar howled like a whimpering dog. Then came Lenny’s scream.

Bob played the sequence again and turned the sound up a lot louder.

“Hey!” Jupiter covered his ears.

Keith looked at Lenny, kept drumming... looked at Lenny again... kept drumming. Then Lenny disappeared for what must have been the hundredth time Bob had seen the footage.

“But this is very strange!” Bob suddenly shouted and abruptly stopped the recording.

The music died away. There was silence... but only briefly as they now heard the jostling ringing of the telephone.

Jupiter jumped up. “Damn! We didn’t hear the phone over that noise!” He ran out of the lab and grabbed the phone. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

13. The Sunken Gold

Inspector Cotta was at the other end of the line. "Cotta here. You called me?"

The First Investigator explained to him what it was about—a tipster, a robbery, and a man in prison.

"That's interesting that you come up with that story," Cotta said. "I'm on that trail myself. It was that song—the *La-La Song* or whatever it's called—that was supposed to be sung in the concert last night. Sue Tamara kindly copied out the rehearsal version from their recording studio and gave it to me. It was the complete version with all the verses!"

Interest and disappointment spread across Jupiter's face at the same time. He would have liked to have the whole song to keep his lead on the investigation. The inspector seemed to sense that.

"Cat got your tongue, Jupiter? Well, even the blind squirrels of the police force can find a nut once in a while."

"Er, yes," Jupiter said. "Sorry, Inspector."

"And now you want some information from me?"

Jupiter had regained his composure. "Gladly! As you can imagine, we have some thoughts on this case!"

"—Which I would like to be a part of," Cotta said. "Information for information!"

"Of course!" said Jupiter. "We wondered if the song actually referred to a robbery that actually happened."

Before Inspector Cotta could answer, Bob came out of the photo lab and made frantic hand movements. Obviously he wanted to show Jupe something important.

The First Investigator shook his head, turned his back to Bob and concentrated on Cotta's reply.

"Yes, Jupiter. A certain Frank Wheeler, currently residing in a prison near LA, committed this crime about four years ago."

"Frank Wheeler," Jupiter repeated. "He is probably in a bad shape now, isn't he?"

"How did you know that?" the inspector remarked in surprise. "Yes, he won't last much longer. He can't even leave his bed anymore. By the way, gold bars of extraordinary value were stolen at that time. Several people could live on that for a long time. The robbery happened during transportation. Wheeler had apparently received a tip for him to exploit a weak spot. Unfortunately, the tipster has not yet been identified. Wheeler had only had indirect contact with him. At that time, we considered the possibility that Wheeler had just made up this tipster."

"But then where would he have got his inside knowledge from?" objected Jupiter.

"You said it. By the way, for investigative reasons, the case hardly got out to the public, otherwise you might have been behind it back then!" Cotta laughed. "—And everything would have been cleared up straight away!"

"And the gold actually sank into the sea?" asked Jupiter.

Inspector Cotta was silent for a moment. "How do you know about that?" he asked. "Where did you get all this information from, Jupiter? I thought you only heard the beginning of the song, and besides that, the song says that the loot was simply hidden."

Now it was Jupiter's turn to remain silent in amazement. "Was that how Lenny sang it?" he then asked. "In the recording you have?"

"Yes, just like that!"

"That... surprises me..." Jupiter stammered, "because in the lyrics—"

"You have the lyrics of that song?" exclaimed Cotta indignantly. "And you're keeping it from me?"

"I was just about to tell you, Inspector Cotta! We are in possession of the sheet music, or rather we were, for it was stolen from us, but we had made a copy, and there it says that when the writer was on his way to Avalon, the loot sank into the sea during a wild storm and was all gone!"

Bob was standing in the doorway again. Jupiter turned to him, annoyed.

"And that is exactly what we have been assuming so far, Jupiter," said Inspector Cotta, while the First Investigator switched on the loudspeaker so that Bob would be quiet and could listen in.

"The loot is understood to be at the bottom of the Pacific. Wheeler had hired a seaplane further north on the coast to fly to Avalon on Santa Catalina Island. There he wanted to hide the gold because he sensed we were on to him, but bad weather forced him to make a water landing northwest of the island. At sea, he got caught in a storm, as evidenced by the weather service. He made several distress calls before going overboard while trying to make repairs. However, the gold bars eventually sank into the sea. Later, his plane was recovered."

"In such a case, there must be an insurance company. Did they search for the gold?"

"They did," said Cotta, "even with technical equipment... but the exact position was difficult to determine despite Wheeler's assistance. Around that spot, the sea is really deep, and the bottom is very fissured. The search became too expensive and was called off."

"What about the brother?"

"We've been monitoring him too, of course. His name is Anthony Wheeler, and he works in the forestry department. We suspect he has nothing to do with the case. In fact, he seems to have broken away from Frank."

"That would fit in a way," Jupiter said, "and did you say that Lenny's rehearsal version says that the gold is hidden?"

"Yes, I listened to it several times today," Cotta replied. "It seems to be a lie told to the tipster that the loot had sunk, instead it was hidden away."

"Why did Lenny rewrite the song?" asked Jupiter. "And why did he want to perform the changed version on his birthday?"

"I would tell you if I knew," said Cotta, "and unfortunately we can't ask him ourselves."

Jupiter thought for a moment. "I'll make you a deal, Inspector Cotta," he said. "I'll send you the photo of the sheet music we got from Lenny himself, and in return you send me the file with the song. Last night, unfortunately, only the very first verse was playing. We have never heard the full song before."

"Do we trust each other like this or should we make a contract?" asked Cotta. There was a note of cheerfulness in his voice.

"You can rely on my word!" said Jupiter.

"Agreed," said Cotta. "I'll e-mail you the recording right away... and Jupiter, get in touch when you know more! After all, it's probably about an abduction! Do we understand each other?"

"All right, Inspector! And thank you!" Jupiter hung up.

Only now did he look at Bob. "Surprising news from Cotta!" he said. "And why are you making such a fuss here?"

“Because I have something important to report,” said Bob, stepping from one foot to the other. “This might interest you, because I now know who triggered the remote control and made Lenny disappear!”

In the meantime, Pete had reached Malibu. He wanted to get the conversation with Debbie over with as quickly as possible, and then devote himself to his favourite surfboard—one that was painted with a shark whose skin shimmered in washed-out US colours.

Full of anticipation, he glanced at the deep blue sea, whose waves rolled seductively towards the land and then, as if pulled by a thread, broke on the sand bank in a swift longitudinal movement. Pete sighed. Surfing would do him good and take his mind off things.

With a heavy heart, he detached himself from the sight and a little later, turned into a path at the end of which Debbie Peterson’s house must be.

The property was secluded, almost on a slope. Pete parked his car at the side of the road and walked the last few metres. He stopped in front of the small, half-open garden gate. A plethora of plants had taken possession of the area. Making its way through the green chaos was a narrow path, at the edge of which rusty metal pillars were set up at irregular intervals. Various symbolic items were stuck on their tops. On closer inspection, Pete recognized a kind of trident, a snake, flowers and two hands holding a candle. They looked pretty esoteric, and somehow Asian.

Pete was still lost in contemplation when the sound of an engine startled him. A few moments later, a motorbike approached and stopped just in front of him. It was a woman, and in one swift movement, she took off her helmet and tucked it under her arm. She appeared petite, yet athletic and muscular.

“Can I help you?” Her voice sounded firm and voluminous.

“I’m looking for Debbie Peterson,” Pete said.

“You found her!” The woman shook her head and long curly hair swirled through the air.

“Do you have a moment?”

“Who are you? A journalist? Usually only surfers who get lost looking for a parking space end up here. It’s a dead end, you know.”

“I’m going surfing later,” Pete said.

“So, what then? Do you have something like a name?”

“Pete Crenshaw. Sorry. I... it’s about Lenny—Lenny the Rock. I just have a few questions.”

She looked at him for a moment and Pete had the impression that her expression darkened. “About Lenny, then. That’s fine with me, but we’d better discuss that inside. Come!”

She walked ahead. After a few metres, the greenery opened up on both sides and a simple house built of wood became visible. From the upper beam of the entrance door, an image of the sun shone down on the visitor.

They entered a small anteroom, which led directly into a kind of living room. A sweet smell hung in the air. At the back of the living area, a spiral staircase led upwards. There was junk everywhere—figurines, candlesticks, a metre-high wooden elephant... Titus Jones would have liked these items.

“Sit down!” she ordered, pointing to a worn leather sofa. “A beer?”

“I’d rather have a soda.”

She went into the kitchen and returned shortly afterwards with two glasses of Coke. After positioning herself on a chair exactly opposite Pete, she said: "Go ahead then! I'm curious!"

The Second Investigator cleared his throat. He did not feel entirely comfortable in his own skin. Jupiter would certainly have a better approach and would have done everything much more cleverly. Should he play with his cards on the table and say that he was an investigator? Something warned him against it. "Miss Peterson, do you know Lenny personally?"

"Why is that any of your business?" it came right back.

"Because... because I'm writing a paper about him!" Pete took a deep breath. He had to think of something quickly. "Yes, a paper about Lenny's life!"

"What for?"

"Uh, for school. Some kind of reporter's course."

"What school do you go to?"

Pete swallowed. No one was usually interested in that!

"Rocky Beach High School," Pete said.

"The teacher?" the interrogation continued.

Goodness. He blurted out the first name that came to mind: "Mr Howard."

"Howard?" She laughed out. "That awful Howard! He's been teaching nothing but chemistry for years! Tough luck, Crenshaw! I went to your school myself! Think of something else, kid!"

Pete got hot. This couldn't be true! "But it's true!" he defended himself. "He takes on courses like that... recently. It's... some kind of extra-curricular courses that the school introduced! We..." Pete searched for the right words. His gaze jumped restlessly around the room. "Isn't that a photo of Lenny?" he suddenly asked and pointed to a photo on top of chest of drawers. "An autographed version as well!"

"Yeah... sure. I'm a fan of his. Nice diversion from the subject, by the way."

"Do you know that Lenny has disappeared?" Pete continued.

If that surprised her, at least she didn't let on. "Disappeared? How? Tell me, is this question also part of your school report? Explain it to me, please!"

"In a way." Pete was sweating. This was not going as he had imagined.

Debbie leaned forward. "Okay. Now let's cut the dramatics. What do you really want? Spit it out!"

Pete reached for the Coke and noticed that the glass in his hand was shaking. Debbie noticed it too.

"Have you ever had an affair with Lenny?" he asked quickly.

She laughed and weighed the word contemptuously: "Affair? ... Ha! How sweet from your mouth! Tell me, how old are you? Have you ever had an affair? Maybe with your best friend's girlfriend?"

"My best friend doesn't have a girlfriend," Pete slipped out.

"That doesn't surprise me," Debbie said dryly, "if he's the same type as you!" She changed her tone back to serious. "Say, Pete, you mentioned that Lenny had disappeared. How do you know that?"

"I was there!"

She was silent and looked at him in a scrutinizing manner.

At that moment, Pete heard a door upstairs opened. He looked up.

"I don't live here alone, you know," Debbie explained calmly.

Two feet in sports shoes stepped onto the spiral staircase, followed by a pair of legs in jeans. Pete stared.

The man followed the turn of the stairs until he appeared fully facing the guest.

Pete almost dropped the glass from his hand in shock. He knew the man. The Second Investigator swallowed.

“Hello, my friend,” the guy said, and the ring on his finger shone in the light.

In one hand, he held a few printed sheets that looked familiar to Pete; in the other, was a gun.

14. Bob Makes an Important Discovery

“I wonder if Pete found out anything from Debbie Peterson?” asked Bob. “Shall I give him a call?”

Jupiter shook his head. “You’re just trying to keep me in suspense! Come on, tell me—who did it? Who used the remote control that made Lenny disappear? I’m guessing one of the musicians, right?”

Bob smiled. “I want you to find that out for yourself!”

“What are you doing?” asked Jupiter. “Are we at school?”

“Oh, Jupe! You always have fun grilling Pete and me with such questions! Now it’s just the other way round for once. So, come on!” Bob turned around and went into the lab.

Jupiter had no choice but to follow him. “You just want to savour your success,” he murmured.

Bob had prepared everything. The video was frozen just before the scene where Lenny went down the trap door. He was still sitting on the box and clouds of fog wafted around his legs.

Bob sat down at the desk and let the video run until Lenny had disappeared.

“I didn’t notice anything,” Jupiter said.

“That’s how I felt,” Bob replied. He repeated everything, but this time with sound.

“I don’t know!” said Jupiter with a certain defiance in his voice.

Bob let it run a third time, but this time in slow motion. “Close your eyes and just listen,” he said. “Pay attention to the music!”

Jupiter grumbled, but did what Bob had asked. It sounded like chewing gum, every note was stretched—even Keith’s drumming strokes.

“The drummer stumbles,” Jupiter said after a few seconds, “is that what you mean?”

“Now you’re on a hot streak, Jupe! What do you mean by ‘stumble’?”

“One time he misses the blow. It clicks so weird. Is there something...”

Bob repeated the scene and stopped at the exact moment Keith misses the blow, but only acoustically. In the still picture, they could see the drumstick whizzing down. Now Bob enlarged the picture. Jupiter stared tensely at the screen. It was not sharp, but it was clear that the drummer had narrowly missed the drum and hit an elongated black object lying next to the edge of the drum.

“The remote control!” said Jupiter.

Bob let the recording continue and almost at the same moment, Lenny slipped down.

“Keith it is!” said Jupiter. “I must admit—you’ve uncovered this brilliantly, Bob!”

Bob smiled sheepishly.

“So that’s why Keith looked at Lenny a couple of times!” said Jupiter. “He wanted to check if Lenny’s position was favourable to trigger the trap door!”

“Exactly,” Bob confirmed. “Keith activates the remote control, Lenny falls... and look what happens next—” Bob let the video run on a little. “Keith unobtrusively drops the remote control, and kicks it towards the trap door.” Bob froze the video again. “See? You can see it here, despite the fog at the bottom!”

“You’re right, Bob!” Jupe said. “Great work!”

“And if you should ask why the remote control is with Keith and not Lenny,” Bob continued, “I can say that that’s because Lenny’s disappearance off the stage was planned for the last song—the *Hobbit* song. So, the remote control was meant to be placed where it was until Lenny takes it for the last song. It happened to be placed near Keith.”

“Makes sense,” Jupe added. “He’s the only one who is sitting down during a performance.”

“But why did Keith do that?” Bob asked.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “He wanted to stop Lenny from singing the *La-La Song*,” he said. “I’m sure he did. I’m just not sure of the reason yet. And to find that out, we have to study the rehearsal version of the song that Inspector Cotta is going to send us. From what I gather from the inspector, Lenny has changed the lyrics at a crucial point. In the rehearsal version, the stolen gold did not sink, but hidden somewhere. If we’re lucky, the file’s already in our e-mail! Come on, Bob!”

Jupiter was finally in hunting fever. He turned around and hurried to the computer.

“It’s here!” exclaimed the First Investigator when he opened their e-mail.

Jupiter remembered his promise and sent Cotta the photos they had taken of Frank Wheeler’s sheet music. Then he downloaded the attachment of the incoming message. The inspector had sent them the music file as promised. It was the *La-La Song*, but now in full length. Bob turned up the speakers and started humming along.

Unlike Pete, that didn’t bother Jupiter very much. He was interested in something completely different—the changed lyrics. They listened to the song from the beginning anyway. Then Lenny came to the fifth verse:

*Offered him a third, which was quite fair;
But he wanted more, to my despair.
Told him that it was all lost at sea;
But hid them at Red Wood House, really,*

*Life can really put you on the spot;
Sometimes you’re lucky, sometimes you’re not!
For with you is the fountain of life;
So little brother, long may you thrive.*

“Why did Lenny rewrite the last two verses?” Bob wondered. “Did he have something to do with the robbery? If I understand correctly, the gold is still there. Frank Wheeler just made up the sea story and actually hid it at the Red Wood House.”

Jupiter raised his hands placatingly. “Slow down,” he said. “How about you write down the changed verses so we can go through it very carefully.” Bob did as suggested.

“As you rightly say,” Jupe said, looking at the changed lyrics, “Lenny rewrote the lyrics for the fifth and sixth verses... but the big question is—why?”

“So back to start,” Bob said. “In the rehearsal version, Frank Wheeler gets the loot; wanted to give a third to the unknown tipster but was refused; tells him a tall-tale about it being lost in the sea; but actually hides the loot in Red Wood House. Where is that?”

“Red Wood House is Lenny’s house,” Jupiter said, “now known as Moonlight Star. Sue told us that, remember?”

Bob grabbed his head. “Come to think of it, yes, they converted the old Red Wood House into Moonlight Star. Then that’s where the gold is hidden? But where?”

“Look at the last verse...” Jupiter said. “It mentions the ‘fountain of life’. That can only mean one thing—at the fountain!”

“Wow!” Bob was flabbergasted.

“Now it explains a lot,” Jupiter continued. “Keith rehearsed the song with Ron, Morning-Joe and Lenny, but Lenny didn’t reveal that he had changed the lyrics. The drummer surely knew that the song was written by Frank Wheeler, but might not have known that Lenny had changed the lyrics. If that is the case, Keith had to think that the gold from the robbery was hidden right under their noses on Moonlight Star, previously known as Red Wood House.”

“In particular, at the fountain,” Bob added.

“He wanted the gold himself,” Jupiter continued, “so he just have to go get it.”

“But to do that, he had to stop Lenny from singing the song last night,” Bob said, “otherwise other people might get the same idea about the gold. Keith wanted to keep everything to himself, so he had Lenny abducted, probably by the fake waiter... But why didn’t Lenny just get the gold himself?”

“Maybe that’s what he wanted—to give a false lead to others first!” said Jupiter ambiguously.

“But who could he be trying to fool like that?”

“Frank’s tipster. According to Cotta, he’s still at large. When Lenny was with us, didn’t he say he wanted to be an investigator too? Solve a case?”

“Of course! And he talked about intervening directly in life,” Bob confirmed. “I thought that was so strange then. Why did he say that? But now I understand! Lenny wanted to set the trap and ambush the tipster, surprise him in his search for the gold and turn him in! But Keith and his accomplice came into the picture!”

Now one thing led to another. “They wanted to abduct Lenny so they could search the fountain in peace,” Jupiter said, “but we disturbed their plan. In the end they had to deal with us first by locking us up and then breaking the lock on the grille door.”

“Then they took off with the gold!” said Bob disappointedly. “And we didn’t stop it! What a bummer!”

Jupiter shook his head. “Slow down, Bob,” he said. “You are talking about the version Lenny wanted to perform, not Frank’s. I rather think they haven’t found anything! Lenny changed the lyrics because he wanted to trap someone. In the original song everything is described as the police knew it earlier. The hiding place at the fountain was probably just a decoy!”

“Then at least they went away empty-handed!” said Bob, relieved. “But who was this mysterious tipster? And why could Lenny be sure he was in the audience?”

“Because he invited him himself,” Jupiter said. “I think it was like this—Frank Wheeler always suspected who it might be, but he had no proof. He told Lenny about it at the prison concert, and that’s when Lenny tried to set the man up. It must have been very tempting for him to convict the tipster!”

“I’m sure you have an idea already.”

Jupiter nodded. “Of course, but first I want an explanation from you as to why Lenny involved us investigators.”

“That doesn’t count!” said Bob. “You just want revenge for earlier!”

Jupiter grinned. “Well?”

Bob thought for a moment. “Because... we’re kind of a safety net! He didn’t want to get the police involved, but he knew we were smart guys and could put one and one together. If something went wrong, we’d be there!”

“—Which we were,” Jupiter said.

“Well, hopefully Lenny won’t expect too much from us,” Bob said.

“Anyway, there was a man at the party who couldn’t explain why he had been invited. He spoke about it more than once. You only noticed him in passing. He was all dolled up, swagger watch, sparkly glasses. His name is Clayton. I don’t know his first name, but it shouldn’t be a problem to find out!”

“We must inform Inspector Cotta,” Bob urged.

Jupiter nodded, but said: “In a moment, Bob. First we should take care of Pete. I wonder why he hasn’t been in touch all this time.”

“Did we agree on this?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, he might have gone surfing then.” Bob took his mobile phone and dialled Pete’s number. It rang, and eventually went to voice mail. “He can’t talk on the phone while surfing,” Bob said.

“Bob, we’re working on a case!” reminded Jupiter. “I only made the suggestion about surfing in jest. It was obvious, wasn’t it?”

“It certainly wasn’t with Pete,” said Bob. “Maybe he’s still with that Debbie girl. Wait, I wrote the address down here!” He pointed to a piece of paper lying in front of the computer. “Shall I give her a call?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Jupiter countered. “We’re going there!”

15. Where is Pete?

Jupiter and Bob cycled to Bob's house where he had parked his Beetle. They put the bikes down, quickly got into the car, and Bob drove off. The traffic flowed swiftly along the coastal road, so it didn't take them too long.

"Anyway, Pete's car isn't here," Bob said as they drove up the small road to Debbie Peterson's house. "Just a motorbike..."

"We'll ask anyway," Jupiter said. "After all, this was supposed to be Pete's first stop!"

Bob parked his Beetle right next to the entrance gate to the property.

As they walked through the garden towards the small house, Jupiter let his gaze wander over the symbolic items on the metal pillars that lined both sides of the path. "A seeker of meaning obviously lives here," he said.

Bob had reached the door and looked for a bell. There wasn't one, so he knocked on the door. "Hello?"

"Anyone home?" called Jupiter. "Miss Peterson?"

They waited.

"Hello?"

Suddenly a window on the first floor was opened. A woman's head emerged. She had to be around forty, Jupiter estimated. Her long brown hair swirled in the wind.

"What do you want?" she asked, more curious than dismissive.

"Are you Debbie Peterson?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes, that's me... and who are you?"

"We're looking for our friend. Pete Crenshaw. Was he with you by any chance?"

"Indeed!" said the woman. "He showed up and asked me about Lenny the Rock. You know, I know Lenny from a while back, but I couldn't tell your friend much. Are you also writing that report for your school club?"

"School club? What—" Bob asked.

Jupiter interrupted him. "No. That was Pete's task. We're only looking for him because we've arranged to meet him."

"Then you should go to the beach!" the woman said. "We had a short chat, then he left. He said wanted to go surfing. Nice boy, by the way!"

For a brief moment, Jupiter wondered if Debbie was lying to them. However, everything seemed plausible. She was just a woman who knew Lenny years ago, so what? At the latest, when they found Pete right there on the beach, they could tick off this routine trail.

"Okay," Jupiter said and turned to go. "Thank you very much then!"

The woman nodded at them and closed the window. Jupiter turned around and started walking.

"That's what I said," Bob said, following him. "Pete's gone surfing! I'm sure his phone is in his car."

Jupiter grimaced. "He could have contacted us anyway! After all, we're worried and he's just taking some time off. To make matters worse, he might even be seeing Kelly or Jeffrey! They keep him away from work all the time. He should take our investigation a little more seriously!"

“You can tell him that in person the next time,” Bob said.

Malibu Beach was not far away. Bob knew Pete’s favourite spot, and when he let the Beetle roll into the car park, he soon spotted Pete’s MG parked there. “There you go,” he said and parked his car.

Jupiter also relaxed. Sometimes he was really too suspicious.

They walked down to the beach. The conditions for surfing were really good, and word had spread. Countless surfers were lurking in the sea, waiting for the perfect wave, but the distance was too great to make out individuals so Jupiter let his gaze wander over the beach—bathers, surfers, in between tourists taking photos.

After a few moments, Jupiter saw something familiar. “Isn’t that Pete’s stuff?” He pointed to a backpack lying on the sand next to a towel and shoes.

“I think so!” Bob said and dashed off.

It was Pete’s clothes, even his T-shirt was crumpled under the backpack. They stood around for a while, staring at the sea, but Pete was nowhere to be seen.

“He should be getting in by now,” Bob said.

Two boys trotted past, their boards tucked under their arms. Bob knew them both by sight. “Is Pete here?”

One of them, blond and short-haired, stopped. “Pete? I know at least ten Petes,” he said with a grin.

“Pete Crenshaw.”

“Oh, him! I don’t know. Aren’t his things lying there?”

“Yes,” said Jupiter, “but somehow we can’t find him!”

“Why don’t you ask Ray the lifeguard. He hangs out with Pete a lot,” said the other of the two, pointing down the beach.

Bob nodded and the two continued walking. “So to the lifeguard tower!”

Ray was about a hundred metres away on one of the typical raised wooden supervisory platforms where he looked at the sea and the beachgoers from there. Bob and Jupiter ran up him and woke him from his dreams. “Hi, Ray! Have you seen Pete? Crenshaw, Pete Crenshaw.”

Ray winced and looked at him. “Aren’t you Jupiter and Bob, his friends? I don’t think Pete was here today as he would have dropped in for a chat! He always does.”

“His stuff is there, anyway. We’re worried!”

“Wait.” Ray waved a colleague over to take his place. “Show me the spot.”

Together they walked back. Ray saw the backpack, nodded wordlessly and looked at the sea, but there was no sign of Pete. Then he let his gaze wander along the beach.

“What’s that?” he asked suddenly and jogged off without waiting for an answer. Jupiter and Bob followed him.

A moment later, they saw where Ray was heading.

“His surfboard!” shouted Bob. “That’s Pete’s surfboard!”

Ray had picked up the surfboard and inspected it—a shark in washed-out US colours. “The sea washed it up here,” he said, pulling the board further ashore.

“Washed it up?” Bob was alarmed. “Like in an accident? Like a... shark?”

“Nope,” Ray said shaking his head. “I don’t think Pete went out there. Something like this happened in Santa Barbara once, but...” Again he cast an appraising glance at the sea. “And if the board is here, he couldn’t have been far out... otherwise the current would have

washed this up much further back. I'm sure nothing happened to him. And I was on duty for a while here! But it's strange, the whole thing!"

"What do you mean?" asked Bob.

"He may have just arrived and not even really taken off yet." Ray scratched his chin. "Perhaps he left his board here and then went somewhere else!"

"Pete could have been running from someone," Jupiter said, thinking, "or he might have spotted someone and chased them... but why?"

Bob looked at Jupiter. The certainty had disappeared from his expression.

"Do you think I can look in his backpack?" asked Ray.

"Sure!"

They went back and Ray opened the backpack. "Hmm..." he went on.

"What do you mean 'hmm'?" asked Bob impatiently.

"The leash," Ray muttered, pulling a black urethane cord from a side pocket. "This is the leash you use to attach the board to your leg... Why is it still in here?"

"Don't you normally always leave them on your board?" asked Jupiter.

"Pete takes them off in the evening. It's one of his quirks," Ray said. "Jupiter, Bob—Pete didn't go into the sea! He certainly didn't! It all doesn't add up, and I'll tell you one thing—he always pays very close attention to his favourite T-shirts. Pete would never have just crumpled it up in the sand! He always folds it neatly."

"I should have noticed that!" said Bob, bending suspiciously over the backpack and rummaging around in it. "Here's Pete's mobile phone!" he exclaimed and pulled it out. "There's no way he would have just left it in here! He usually leaves it in his car."

Jupiter stared at Bob. Then he knelt down and gathered Pete's things. "Come on, Bob!" he shouted. "We have to go back—to Debbie Peterson! Ray, can you take care of the board?"

"Sure. Good luck, guys! I hope you find him soon!"

Jupiter and Bob hurried to the Beetle and drove back to Debbie Peterson's house as fast as they could. As they turned into the narrow road, Jupiter immediately saw that something had changed.

"The motorbike's gone!"

Bob brought his vehicle to a halt. A few seconds later, they were running through the garden towards the house.

"Hello?" called Jupiter while they were still running. "Miss Peterson, please open the door immediately!" He reached the entrance and jiggled the knob, but the door was locked.

"Wait!" Bob darted off, from window to window, all around the house. "No one," he shouted. "All dark inside!"

"What a bummer!" Jupiter took a breath. "I'm afraid Pete is in great danger! As hard as it is for me to say, we must ask Inspector Cotta for help. I shouldn't have been so hasty earlier."

"In the time it took us to go to the beach, Debbie couldn't possibly have arranged all this," Bob said. "She must have been there earlier, planting Pete's things on the beach—if she was behind it at all. I haven't given up hope that there's a simple explanation for it all."

"And what is that?"

"A prank by Pete, for example," Bob said, but it sounded unconvinced.

16. The Wild Eagle

Jupiter called Inspector Cotta, who was incidentally with Sue Tamara at the Moonlight Star compound. They told him about Pete's disappearance. Although Cotta reacted angrily because The Three Investigators had once again put themselves in danger instead of letting the police do the work, he was also very concerned.

Jupiter and Bob decided to meet the inspector at Moonlight Star. Now they had to combine all their forces. As Bob drove the Beetle towards the canyon, Jupiter thought about all the information once more.

"There was a gold robbery," Jupiter began. "A tipster set it up—I suspect it was this Mr Clayton. Frank Wheeler committed the crime. Later he lost the loot when he tried to hide it. Now he is in prison and has lost all hope—which could mean anything. Frank Wheeler knew Keith from the past, at least that's what the song says, and Keith is now the drummer of Moonlight Star."

They had just passed a petrol station and Bob had to slow down because a pick-up truck was driving too slowly in front of him.

"Lenny gave a concert in a prison," Bob picked up the thread, "and afterwards, Frank got a chance to speak to Lenny. On that occasion, Frank gave Lenny the sheet music. The song is a kind of apology to his brother Anthony. Probably Lenny was supposed to deliver it."

"But Lenny held on to it and rewrote the song to set a trap for Clayton," Jupe took over again. "In his version of the song, the loot was not lost, but hidden at Moonlight Star. Clayton is supposed to look for it at the fountain and be surprised in the act by Lenny. So Lenny practises the song with his band. Keith hears the lyrics and also thinks that the gold is there at the fountain. He wants to get the gold. There had probably been a fight between the band members, at least Keith was unhappy. I could hear that in our conversation with him. There must also be a connection between him and Debbie, and she is involved... which probably explains Pete's disappearance... and Clayton maybe in it as well..."

"What about Durnell, the musician Lenny supposedly stole a song from?" asked Bob. "Why was he mugged?"

"Well, I suspect he got in the way of the abductor when he was about to leave."

"Or it was all fake and he was in on it..." Bob suggested.

"I'm sure we missed something," Jupiter said, thinking deeply. "There has to be something we missed!"

"But what is it?" asked Bob. He thought of the package Lenny had given them and what had been in it. It was the starting point of everything—and that night, the sheet music had been stolen. But why? Who knew about the package? Actually, only one person came into question—the man at the salvage yard who had later turned up at the party disguised as a waiter! He had seen Lenny giving them the package.

The truck in front of them slowed down and Bob had to interrupt his flow of thoughts.

Jupiter seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "I've been thinking all the time that the perpetrators would have search the fountain thoroughly, and they did not find any gold there... but that's really the end of it, isn't it?"

"Unless they think the gold is somewhere else," Bob said, stepping on the accelerator.

Jupiter looked thoughtfully out of the side window. “You know what? You could be right, Bob... So after not finding the gold based on Lenny’s version of the song, the perpetrators stole the original sheet music from us—but the other things weren’t taken. So the lyrics were decisive... but why? The original lyrics of the song must contain some other information on the whereabouts of the gold!”

Both of them fell silent for a while.

Then Jupiter suddenly asked: “Do you have the printouts of the *La-La Song* with you?”

Bob pointed with his thumb to the back seat. “In my backpack along with the other printouts we made.”

The First Investigator pushed the seatbelt aside and turned around. As Bob turned into the canyon, Jupiter took the printout with the *La-La Song* out of the envelope, and while Bob steered rapidly from one curve to the next, Jupe read through the lyrics several times. “Can you please slow down a bit?” he said suddenly. “I’m going to be sick!”

“It’s about Pete!”

“I know...” Jupiter stared straight ahead through the front window for a few minutes. Then he looked at the piece of paper again. “Why did Frank Wheeler write this on used paper?” he asked.

“You mean the grocery list?” Bob asked. “Perhaps he just grabbed whatever he could find,” Bob suggested. “The inspiration for a song could come at any time, you know?”

“Yeah, and why do you even have a grocery list in a prison?” Jupe wondered. “Aren’t all food provided?”

Although the road curved on, Jupe looked for quite a while at the grocery items and prices which were written in pencil. It said:

1 Cheddar Cheese Block: \$7.10

4 Bottles Orange Juice: \$16.40

4 Tubs Chocolate Ice Cream: \$23.40

2 Packets Pistachio Nuts: \$19.60

24 Cans Coke: \$24.50

5 Dark Chocolate Bars: \$20.60

1 Bottle Instant Coffee Powder: \$15.30

“These prices... \$7.10, \$16.40, \$23.40, and so on... hmm... I think I can make something out of it!” he suddenly exclaimed. “Let’s see!”

The First Investigator took out a pen and his eyes flew back and forth on the song lyrics as he scribbled something next to the lyrics.

Less than a minute later, Jupiter exclaimed: “My, how simple it is, Bob! You’ll be amazed! It’s all coming together very differently! Different from what Lenny thought; different from what the police thought; and different from what we thought earlier!”

Bob risked a sideways glance. “Namely?”

“Frank Wheeler used Lenny as a messenger, not to deliver an apology to his brother, but a coded message—in the song lyrics!”

“Let me guess,” Bob said, shifting down a gear, “a coded message as to where the gold is?”

“Correct! This so-called grocery list—the dollar amounts refer to the corresponding line in the song, the digit after the decimal point refers to the corresponding word in this line. You ignore the chorus, and if you pick out all the words and line them up one after the other, you get: ‘The... gold... is... in... the... Wild... Eagle!’”

“Wild Eagle?” Bob had reached the junction to Moonlight Star and turned in with a sharp steering manoeuvre.

“The gold is in the Wild Eagle!” shouted Jupiter. Now there was no stopping him. “Wild Eagle—that’s an old excursion restaurant in the upper part of the canyon! So the gold is hidden there! Everyone fell for it—that plane ride with the supposed loss of the loot was a fake! As with this so-called song of apology! In reality, the song has a coded message!”

“Then we’ve got to get this to Cotta!” Bob said as he sped along the road so fast that the stones splashed to the side.

After a short time, he reached Lenny the Rock’s estate. The gate was open, and Inspector Cotta’s car was parked in front of the house. A second police car was also there.

“A message for Frank’s brother!” Jupiter resumed his sentence. “Anthony Wheeler. He’s probably not as innocent as everyone thinks... or maybe Frank just wants to leave the gold to Anthony because he can’t do anything with it himself!”

“Wow!” said Bob, stopping the car and getting out. “That will surprise the inspector!”

“We have to go to the Wild Eagle immediately!” Jupiter called after him.

“Where to?” a voice asked. Inspector Cotta and Sue Tamara came along the path. They must have overheard the last words.

“Inspector Cotta!” Jupiter shouted and got out.

In brief sentences, he reported what he had just found out.

More and more wrinkles formed on Cotta’s forehead and he muttered: “So that’s why Keith disappeared from the scene!”

“We have to go there!” cried Jupiter impatiently. “Pete is in danger!”

“—And Lenny too!” said Sue Tamara. “My goodness, if I’d known! They’ve abducted him! And Keith’s in on it! I knew they had arguments about funds and royalties, but I had never expected Keith would go this far!”

“I’m afraid they have lost a bit of control of the story,” Jupiter said. “Hopefully, when Anthony and Keith have found the gold, Lenny and Pete will be released. I reckon the gold is so valuable that Keith and Anthony can easily abscond abroad with it!”

“You can assume that, Jupiter,” Cotta agreed.

“There’s no time to waste!” Jupiter urged. “Let’s go now!”

“No way, Jupiter! The police will take over from now!” said Cotta. “You’ve done an excellent job, but now it’s over for you! One abducted investigator should really be enough!”

“Inspector—” Jupe began.

Cotta turned away, tapped on his mobile phone and then briefly spoke something into it. A little later, three policemen joined him. They had obviously searched the area. The inspector gave them a few quick instructions.

Then Cotta turned to the two investigators and said: “Now for you two, go back to Rocky Beach. Stay there and wait for me to call you. I don’t want you to get into any more trouble!”

Jupiter and Bob looked at each other. “But it’s about Pete!” Bob argued.

“Exactly. I’ll call you when he’s free! Don’t argue!” Together with the other two policemen he got into his official car and sped away from the square. Sue Tamara looked at least as puzzled as Jupiter and Bob.

17. The Restaurant or the Cave?

There was nothing else they could do. Jupiter and Bob said goodbye to Sue Tamara, got into Bob's car and drove off.

Along the way, Jupiter stared straight ahead in silence, with an expression on his face as if he was about to bite the car's dashboard.

"We're not about to give up just like that, Bob," Jupiter suddenly said, "especially when Pete is still out there somewhere."

"What are we going to do now that Cotta does not allow us to tag along," Bob wondered.

At that moment, they reached Hidden Treasure, the curio shop in the canyon. Mr Strummer, the owner, was shuffling across the square. When he heard the rattling of Bob's Beetle, he looked up and waved to them.

"We might as well stop here for a moment," Jupiter said. "There is no point going back to Rocky Beach yet. At least let us wait here... and think of what to do next."

Bob let the Beetle roll out onto a car park space near to Hidden Treasure. "Mr Strummer's coming over. He might be interested to know the story about Lenny since he was at the party after all."

"How's everything with you two?" asked Mr Strummer.

Jupiter told him what had happened since the concert. The shop owner was curious and asked about every detail.

"And now the inspector has gone to the Wild Eagle without us," Jupiter finally concluded his report.

"The Wild Eagle?" Mr Strummer remarked. "The restaurant or the cave?"

"The restaurant, of course," Bob replied.

Jupiter looked up, surprised. "Excuse me? What is it about a cave? Is there a cave named the Wild Eagle?"

"The Wild Eagle Cave, of course," said the shop owner. "Around here, there are two places called 'Wild Eagle'. I've lived here long enough to know its history. The restaurant owner grew up here and gave his restaurant the same name as the cave located further down in a remote rocky area of the canyon."

Jupiter grabbed the man by the arm. "Mr Strummer! Where is this cave?"

"Do you think your friend is there?"

"Frank Wheeler is much more likely to have known the cave and its hiding places from his youth than the restaurant!" Jupe said excitedly.

Strummer nodded thoughtfully. "I guess you're right! Wait. I'll get you a map!"

The shop owner ran into his shop. Jupiter and Bob followed him. From a revolving rack, he took a brand-new walking map, unfolded it and marked a spot with a pen. "Here... here is the Wild Eagle Cave. The car will only take you as far as here..." he said and pointed at a spot on the map. "For the rest of the way, you have to go on foot, until here, then follow the stream! I'll give you this map. After all, it's about Pete!"

Jupiter thanked him and took it. "Please inform Inspector Cotta! Tell him to go there immediately! Every second counts!"

Mr Strummer nodded and made his way to the phone.

As quickly as they could, the two investigators got into the Beetle and set course for the wooded side areas of the canyon. At first the road was still paved, then the surface deteriorated. Finally, they reached a small car park where there was not a single car.

“Are we in the right place?” asked Bob. “... Or are we too late?”

“Both possible,” Jupiter said and looked at the map. He pointed to a path that could be easy to miss in the thicket. “That way!”

Bob carried his backpack and off they went.

They still had a good kilometre to go, and it was quite uphill. However, that did not deter Jupiter, as he even led the way with brisk steps.

When they had to cross a dried-up stream, Bob said: “Here we have to hit the terrain and climb up the slope, don’t we?”

Jupiter put his index finger to his lips and pointed ahead. There was a motorbike hidden in the undergrowth! “Debbie Peterson!” whispered Jupiter. “They are here!”

“So we go up?”

“Wait!” Jupiter crept up to the motorbike, bent down and fiddled with the engine. Then he nodded with satisfaction. “Now,” he said.

It was tedious to climb through the terrain. If they went too fast, they would make too much noise; if they went slower, they might be too late.

However, after a few minutes, they were already at their destination. They almost went past the cave entrance that was overgrown with prickly plants and wild vines. Luckily, they noticed an old, rusty sign that said: ‘Do not enter! Danger!’

“Probably because of falling rocks,” Juve said, “but it’s an emergency!”

They crept closer to the entrance and listened. Scratching noises drifted from the inside. A faint glow of light reflected off the cave wall. Suddenly a man said: “Hurry up! My feet are falling asleep!”

“Then you come help if you can do it better!” said another man.

And then a woman was heard: “Stop arguing!”

“No, go ahead and argue!” a fourth voice boomed. “I like it!”

“Lenny!” Bob whispered.

“Shut up! Otherwise I’ll put the gag on you again!” one of the other two men shouted.

“I hope Pete is in there as well!” whispered Jupiter. “They must have come by car. It’s probably hidden somewhere so we didn’t see it along the way here!”

The woman said: “I’ll go outside and check if the coast is clear!”

“Bummer!” Jupiter whispered.

“Hey, don’t venture out too far,” a man said. “We are almost done here.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Debbie said. “Anyway, give me your gun to be on the safe side.”

Without hesitation, the two investigators looked around and ducked behind a ledge. A few moments later, Debbie Peterson came out of the cave, stretched and murmured softly: “Men...”

Jupiter looked around and picked up a short branch. He turned to Bob and made the sign of a gun with his other hand. Bob nodded. Then Juve whispered: “Get the rope out!” Bob unzipped his backpack and took out two pieces of rope.

As Debbie stood with her back to them, Juve took three quick steps towards her, shoved the branch into her back and hissed with a disguised low voice: “Not a sound... or it’s all over for you! Drop the gun and keep your hands up!”

Debbie flinched, startled. Hesitantly, she dropped the gun and then raised her hands.

Jupiter used his foot to sweep the gun away, as Bob came up and picked up the weapon.

“Now stay quiet or else...” Jupe warned Debbie, and then took the two pieces of rope from Bob.

The First Investigator pulled Debbie’s arms to her back and began to tie her wrists together, then her feet. Finally, they even gagged her to be on the safe side.

Satisfied that Debbie was immobilized and would not cause any trouble, Jupe took over the gun from Bob and both of them sneaked into the cave. They could not quite avoid the sound of footsteps.

“Debbie?” a man asked. “It’s almost time!”

Jupiter and Bob went on. They noticed it was getting brighter inside the cave. Quietly, Jupe peeked around a corner.

Keith was scraping a spot on a rock with a pick. “Got it!” he said at the same moment, pulling at the rock. Behind him stood the fake waiter, assisting him with a flashlight.

In the glow of another lamp, Jupiter saw Lenny tied up and lying on the ground. Right next to him lay... Pete! Apparently they were both unharmed. The First Investigator felt a mighty relief.

All four stared spellbound at the spot on the rock. No one realized that the two investigators were there. Keith had now pulled the rock completely out of its position. The fake waiter stepped forward and shone his light into the hole. The light reflected from inside shimmered golden.

“Wow!” said the fake waiter reverently.

“Good day, gentlemen!” said Jupe as he stepped out and pointed the gun at the two criminals.

Everyone turned around, startled. At that moment, Bob came up from behind Jupiter.

Lenny laughed boisterously and shouted: “The Three Investigators! I knew it! My little life insurance!”

Pete just groaned: “Thank goodness!”

Meanwhile, Keith and the fake waiter looked at the First Investigator as if the US President were standing in front of them.

Bob went ahead to free Lenny first.

Jupiter faced the fake waiter and said: “Mr Anthony Wheeler... I’m sorry that your brother’s little golden inheritance has now fallen through for you. The police is close by. It’s no use trying to escape. Debbie is... uh... pretty tied up at the moment, waiting to be arrested... so there’s nothing good to your future together anyway!”

“You... you...” Wheeler said haltingly.

“Every further violation of the law only increases your punishment,” Jupiter said calmly.

Pete looked at him admiringly. If Jupiter wanted to, he could feign great self-confidence, even if it looked completely different inside.

“You are not going to get away with this!” roared the fake waiter.

“Not me, but you, Mr Wheeler! You were at our salvage yard with your accomplice to tamper with Lenny’s car,” Jupiter said unapologetically. “You wanted to prevent Lenny from performing the *La-La Song* in public and someone else getting the gold, because you wanted it yourself! When that didn’t work out with the car accident, you had to abduct Lenny at his concert at short notice. And Debbie, she abducted Pete when he was close to getting some answers.”

At that moment, Lenny was freed and he came up to Jupe and took over the gun from him. “I think I better handle this thing,” the rock star said, as Bob began to free Pete.

The First Investigator continued: "You suspected the gold was at Lenny's fountain at Moonlight Star and wanted to search for it in peace during the night after the concert, but unfortunately we, The Three Investigators, were there as well. So you had to rethink and first lure us into a trap. Congratulations on that. With a lot of imagination, you succeeded!"

Anthony Wheeler remained silent.

"By the way, did you actually knock Tim Durnell down in the car park?" asked Jupiter.

"I'm not telling you anything!" the fake waiter barked.

Suddenly Keith opened his mouth. "He did," he said. "He was going to get Lenny's two masks and all sorts of tools out of the car. The whole thing got out of hand for you anyway, Tony! When I told you about the song and you asked me for help, you said it was all going to be a quiet, simple story, and now see what it got you into?"

"Why did you take part in this in the first place, Keith?" asked Jupiter.

"I'd like to know that too!" Lenny added.

Keith was silent.

"Well, I dare you!" said Wheeler. "You don't even have the guts to say it!"

"I once... had an affair with Sue Tamara," Keith murmured, "only briefly, Lenny. Honest! A long time ago! Tony blackmailed me with that."

Lenny roared with laughter. "I know that all along! Sue told me and I forgave her long ago!"

"Is that all, Keith?" Anthony Wheeler continued. "Why don't you admit that you also wanted the big money? How many times have you told me that you felt short-changed in the band!"

"Man," said Lenny, "what kind of rock-'n'-roller are you?"

18. ... As He Lives and Breathes

The next day, The Three Investigators were back at Moonlight Star with Lenny and Sue Tamara. The burning wood crackled in the fireplace.

"My plan to catch Clayton has gone down the drain," said Lenny. "How lucky that you were clever enough to get that inspector to the cave in time to arrest everyone!"

"Yes. Still, it almost went wrong," Pete said. "After Anthony didn't find any gold at the fountain, he put one and one together and took an interest in what was in the package you had given us that day. That's how he came across his brother's original lyrics and got on the right track!"

"Written after the song lyrics was an old secret code created between the Wheelers when they were children," Jupiter said. "Anthony recognized it immediately, of course. They simply called it 'La-La' code back then, after the chorus from some other song. They also both knew the Wild Eagle Cave from their childhood times. Anthony confessed that to Inspector Cotta."

Lenny nodded. "What kind of guy is this Anthony anyway?" he asked. "Do you know?"

"From what I understand now, he's actually not a bad guy, but he's had a lot of bad luck," Jupiter said. "Inspector Cotta told me that he even wrote a book—*My Botched Life*. Unfortunately all the publishers he contacted rejected it. Later, Tony really went off the rails and met Debbie, who had once sung backing vocals in your band. Together they wanted to build a future with the gold somewhere in an Asian country... but it's not that easy, as they have found out." Jupiter paused. "Only that tipster Clayton remains at large, unfortunately. Inspector Cotta has been nipping at his heels! I'm sure he'll find some evidence and convict him—maybe if we give him a little help!"

Lenny nodded. "Do that!"

They were silent. The fire in the fireplace grew weaker. Sue stood up and added wood.

"Thank you, Sookie," Lenny said.

"What will become of the band now that Keith has betrayed you like that?" Bob asked Lenny.

The musician took a breath. "Yes, Keith. He's always been the one I've got on least well with, especially since the story with Sue. I guess I'll have to look around for a new drummer, especially as prison is waiting for him! Ron, Morning-Joe and I will carry on in the meantime."

"Why is Morning-Joe called Morning-Joe?" Bob enquired. "I've been wondering that for a long time."

"Very simple," said Lenny. "Because during our tours, he was always the first to get up—usually before eleven!" He laughed uproariously.

Bob grinned at Juve. "That's what I imagine it will be for us as well! Morning-Juve will be making the coffee while we're still in bed!"

But the First Investigator was not yet in the mood for small talk. "Lenny, I still have one question: How did Anthony overpower you so quickly under the stage? And also got you to sign the forged letter to Sue? You are, if I may say so, a lot stronger than he is..."

"He threatened me with a gun," Lenny said, "but not only that. He said he would—"

“—Set off a bomb if you didn’t do what he wanted, and all the guests would be killed!” Jupiter completed the sentence.

“Wow!” said Lenny. “My respects! That’s exactly how it was!”

“It was all just powers of deduction, experience and situational empathy,” he said. “It was a dummy, by the way.” Jupiter pulled out the piece of wire he had found on the floor under the stage.

“Jupiter Jones, as he lives and breathes,” exclaimed Sue Tamara, pouring lemonade for The Three Investigators. “We should toast to such a great line!”

They raised their glasses and toasted each other.

Jupiter took a quick sip and asked: “Lenny, when you visited Frank Wheeler in prison, what exactly did he ask you to do?”

“Oh, Frank, said that he is not going to make it much longer—the last I heard. Did you know that?” Lenny put down his beer glass. “In fact, he’s into music as a hobby. On that day after the performance at the prison, he pulled me aside to have a word and then slipped me the song sheet to hand to his brother. I had assumed that it was a brotherly farewell.”

“So I guess this mysterious *La-La Song* is Frank’s last song,” Bob remarked.

“Yeah, I suppose so...” Lenny said. “There’s one more thing—he also told me about his suspicions regarding Clayton.”

“That’s when the desire to catch Clayton grew in you,” Jupiter said.

Lenny smiled. “Jupiter, I have written many songs—love songs, enigmatic songs, but also political songs. When I was young I thought they could change the world and make a difference. Later I realized it’s not that simple.”

“But you could, I mean, make a difference,” Bob said, searching for the right words. “Maybe not directly political... but when I listen to my favourite music, everything feels different and I see things in a new way. Some songs can be intense and beautiful... and they can bring back memories, bring the past to life, at least for a few moments... so they do intervene in my life!”

Lenny looked at him calmly. “Do you play an instrument?”

“He’s into humming,” Pete interjected.

Bob cradled his head. “A little guitar...”

“I’ll go get two!” Lenny said and stood up.